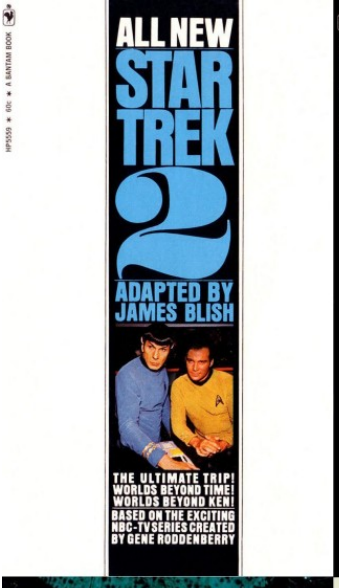
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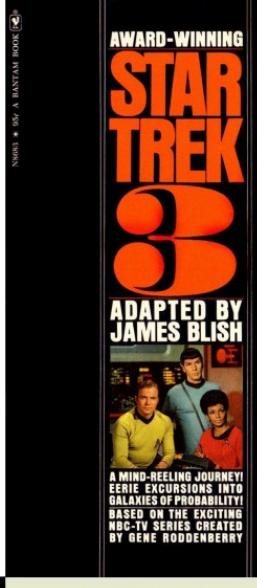
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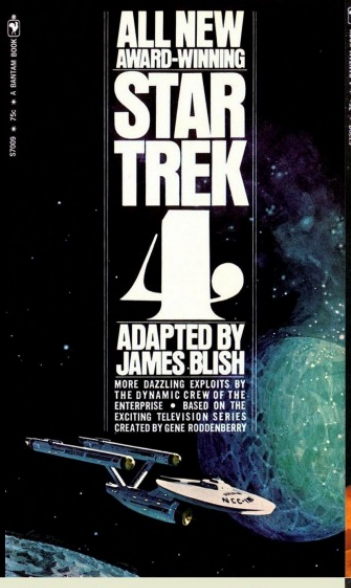
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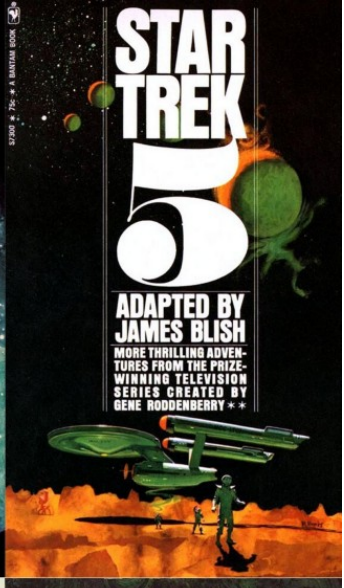
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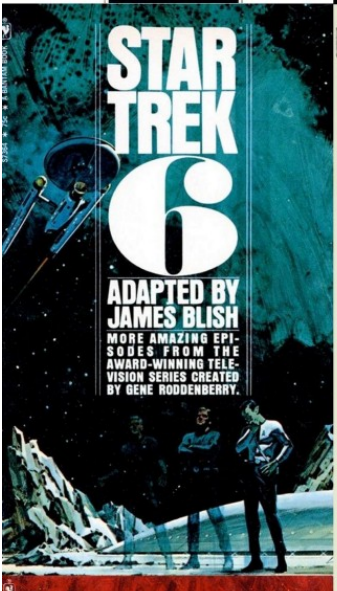
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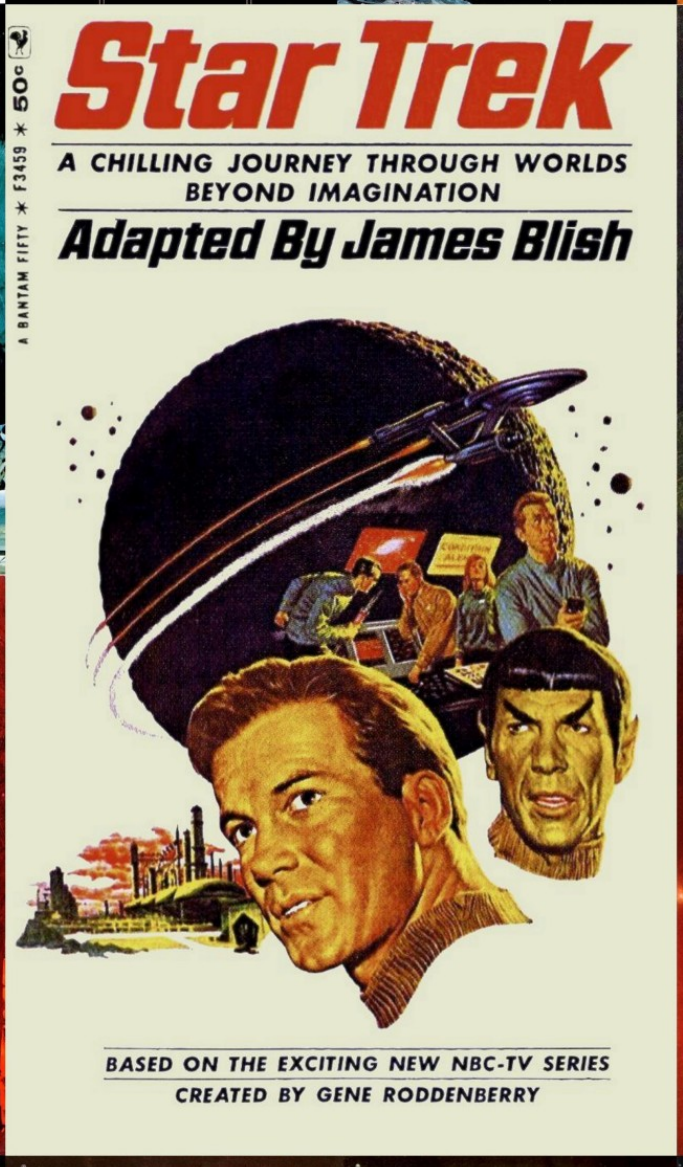
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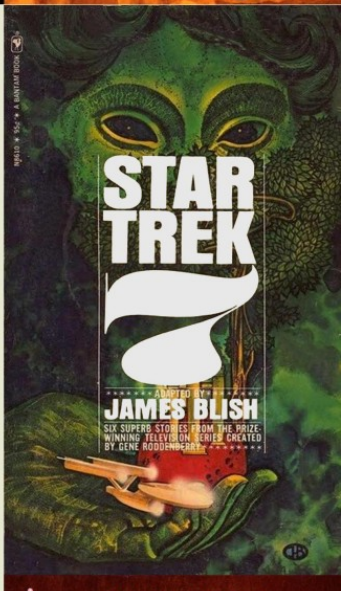
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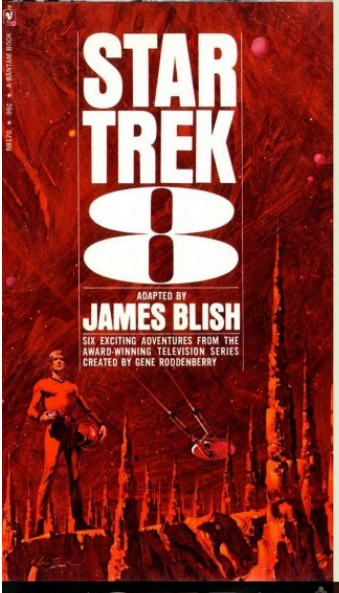
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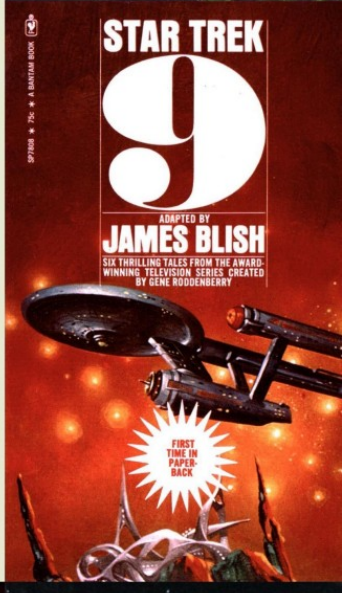
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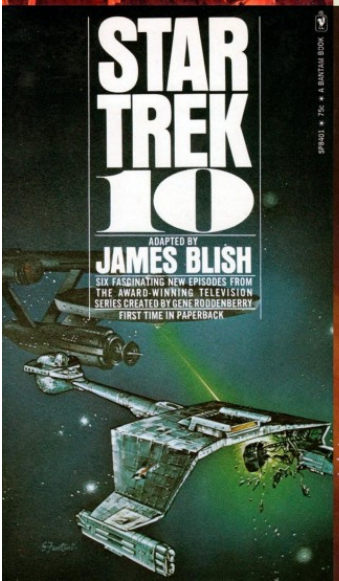
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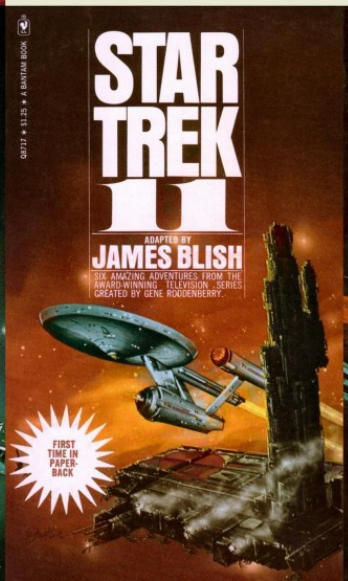
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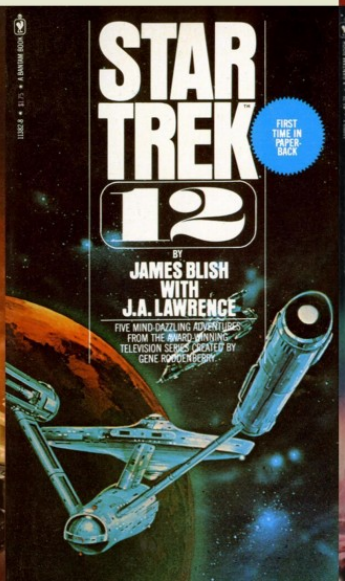
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WITH
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A STAR TREK ADVENTURE
MUDD'S ANGELS
ADAPTED BY
J. A. LAWRENCE
THRILLING EXCURSIONS FROM THE AWARD-WINNING TELEVISION SERIES CREATED BY GENE RODDENBERRY

Star Trek

ADAPTED BY
JAMES BLISH

BASED ON THE EXCITING
NEW NBC-TV SERIES CREATED
BY GENE RODDENBERRY

A NATIONAL GENERAL COMPANY

STAR TREK

A Bantam Book / published January 1967 - May 1978

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Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The plots and the characters in these stories are adapted from individual scripts for the television series *Star Trek.* Hence, although I am the only author of record for this book, each story in it is in effect a collaboration with a different script-writer.

JAMES BLISH
Alexandria, Va.
1966

THE CAGE

(Gene Roddenberry)

When the distress signal from Talos IV came through, via old-fashioned radio, Captain Christopher Pike was of two minds about doing anything about it. The message said it was from survivors of the SS *Columbia,* and a library search by Spock showed that a survey ship of that name had indeed disappeared in that area—eighteen years ago. It had taken all of those years for the message, limited to the speed of light, to reach the *Enterprise,* which passed through its wave-front just slightly eighteen light-years from the Talos system. A long time ago, that had been.

In addition, Pike had his own crew to consider. Though the *Enterprise* had come out of the fighting around Rigel VIII—her maiden battle—unscarred, the ground skirmishing had not been as kind to her personnel. Spock, for example, was limping, though he was trying to minimize it, and Navigator Jose Tyler's left forearm was bandaged down to his palm. Pike himself was unhurt, but he felt desperately tired.

Nevertheless, the library also reported Talos IV to be habitable, so survivors from the *Columbia* might still be alive; and since the *Enterprise* would be passing within visual scanning distance anyhow, it wouldn't hurt to take a look. The chances of finding anything at this late date…

But almost at once, Tyler picked up reflections from the planet's surface whose polarization and scatter pattern indicated large, rounded chunks of metal, which might easily have been parts of a spaceship's hull. Pike ordered the *Enterprise* into orbit.

"I'll want a landing party of six, counting myself. Mr Tyler, you'll be second in command, and we'll need Mr Spock too; both of you, see that there's a fresh dressing on your wounds. Also, Dr Boyce, Chief Garrison and ship's geologist. Number One, you're in command of the *Enterprise* in our absence. Who seconds you now?"

"Yeoman Colt, sir."

Pike hesitated. That this left the bridge dominated by women didn't bother him; female competence to be in Star Fleet had been tested and proven before he had been born. And Pike had the utmost confidence in Number One, ordinarily the ship's helmsman and, after the Rigel affair, the most experienced surviving officer. Slim and dark in a Nile Valley sort of way, she was one of those women who always look the same between the ages of twenty and fifty, but she had a mind like the proverbial steel trap and Pike had never seen her shaken in any situation. Yeoman Colt, however, was a recent replacement, and an unknown quantity. Well, the assignment was likely to prove a routine one, anyhow.

"Very well. We'll beam down to the spot where Mr Tyler picked up those reflections."

This proved to be on a rocky plateau, not far from an obvious encampment—a rude collection of huts, constructed out of slabs of rock, debris from a spaceship hull, scraps of canvas and other odds and ends. Several fairly old men were visible, all bearded, all wearing stained and tattered garments. One was carrying water; the others were cultivating a plot of orange vegetation. The ingenuity and resolute will which had enabled them to exist for nearly two decades on this forbidding alien world were everywhere evident.

One of them looked up in the direction of the landing party and froze, clearly unable to believe his eyes. At last he called hoarsely, "Winter! *Look!*"

A second man looked up, and reacted almost as the first had. Then he shouted; "They're men! Human!"

The sound of their voices brought other survivors out of their huts and sheds. The youngest looked to be nearly fifty, but they were tanned, hardened, in extraordinarily good health. The two groups approached each other slowly, solemnly; Pike could almost feel the intensity of emotion. He stepped forward and extended a hand.

"Captain Christopher Pike, United Spaceship *Enterprise.*"

The first survivor to speak mutely accepted Pike's hand, tears on his face. At last he said, with obvious effort, "Dr Theodore Haskins, American Continent Institute."

"They're *men!* Here to take us back!" the man called Winter said, laughing with sudden relief. "You are, aren't you? Is Earth all right?"

"Same old Earth," Pike said, smiling. "You'll see it before long."

"And you won't believe how fast you can get back," Tyler added. "The time barrier's been broken! Our new ships can…"

He broke off, mouth open, staring past Haskins' shoulder. Following the direction of the navigator's gaze, Pike saw standing in a hut doorway a remarkably beautiful young woman. Although her hair was uncombed and awry, her makeshift dress tattered, she looked more like a woodland nymph than the survivor of a harrowing ordeal. Motioning her forward, Haskins said, "This is Vina. Her parents are dead; she was born almost as we crashed."

There were more introductions all around, but Pike found himself almost unable to take his eyes off the girl. Perhaps it was only the contrast she made with the older men, but her young, animal grace was striking. No wonder Tyler had stared.

"No need to prolong this," Pike said. "Collect what personal effects you want to keep and we'll be off. I suggest you concentrate on whatever records you have; the *Enterprise* is amply stocked with necessities, and even some luxuries."

"Extraordinary," Haskins said. "She must be a very big vessel."

"Our largest and most modern type; the crew numbers four hundred and thirty."

Haskins shook his head in amazement and bustled off. Amidst all the activity, Vina approached Pike and drew him a little to one side.

"Captain, may I have a word?"

"Of course, Vina."

"Before we go, there is something you should see. Something of importance."

"Very well. What is it?"

"It's much easier to show than to explain. If you'll come this way…"

She led him to a rocky knoll some distance from the encampment, and pointed to the ground at its base. "There it is."

Pike did not know what he had expected—anything from a grave to some sort of alien artifact—but in fact he saw nothing of interest at all, and said so. Vina looked disappointed.

"The angle of the light is probably wrong," she said. "Come around to this side."

They changed places, so that his back was to the knoll, hers to the encampment. As far as Pike could tell, this made no difference.

"I don't understand," he said.

"You will," Vina said, the tone of her voice changing suddenly. "You're a perfect choice."

Pike looked up sharply. As he did so, the girl vanished.. It was not the fading dematerialization of the Transporter effect; she simply blinked out as though someone had snapped off a light. With her went all the survivors and their entire encampment, leaving nothing behind but the bare plateau and the stunned men from the *Enterprise.*

There was a hiss behind him and he spun, reaching for his phaser. A cloud of white gas was rolling toward him, through which he could see an oddly shaped portal which, perfectly camouflaged as a part of the rock, had noiselessly opened to reveal the top of a lift shaft. He had an instant's impression of two occupants—small, slim, pale, humanlike creatures with large elongated heads, in shimmering metallic robes; one of them was holding a small cylinder which was still spitting the white spray.

In the same instant, the gas hit him and he was paralyzed, still conscious but unable to move anything but his eyes. The two creatures stepped forward and dragged him into the opening.

"Captain!" Spock's voice shouted in the distance. Then there was the sound of running, suddenly muffled as though the doors had closed again, and then the lift dropped with a hissing *whoosh* like that of a high-speed pneumatic tube. Above, and still more distantly, came the sound of a rock explosion as someone fired a phaser at full power, but the hit simply fell faster.

With it, Pike fell into unconsciousness.

He awoke clawing for his own phaser, a spongelike surface impeding his movements. The gun was gone. Rolling to his feet, he looked around, at the same time reaching next for his communicator. That was gone too; so was his jacket.

He was in a spotless utilitarian enclosure. The spongy surface turned out to belong to a plastic shape, apparently a sort of bed, with a filmy metallic-cloth blanket folded on it. There was also a free-form pool of surging water, with a small drinking container sitting on the floor next to it. A prison cell, clearly; the bars…

But there were no bars. The fourth wall was made up entirely of a transparent panel. Pike hurried to it and peered through. He found himself looking up and down a long corridor, faced with similar panels; but they were offset to, rather than facing each

other, so that Pike could see into only small angled portions of the two nearest him on the other side.

Some sound he had made must have penetrated into the corridor, for suddenly there was a wild snarl, and in the cell—cage?—to his left, a flat creature, half anthropoid, half spider, rushed hungrily at him, only to be thrown back, its ugly fangs clattering against the transparency. Startled, Pike looked to the right; in this enclosure he could see a portion of some kind of tree. Then there was a leathery flapping, and an incredibly thin humanoid/bird creature came into view, peering curiously but shyly toward Pike's cage. The instant it saw Pike watching, it whirled and vanished.

As it did, a group of the pale, large-headed men like those who had kidnapped him came into view, coming toward him. They were lead by one who wore an authoritative-looking jeweled pendant on a short chain around his neck. They all came to a halt hi front of Pike's cage, silently watching him. He studied them in turn. They were quite bald, all of them, and each had a prominent vein across his forehead.

Finally, Pike said, "Can you hear me? My name is Christopher Pike, commander of the vessel *Enterprise* of the United Federation of Planets. Our intentions are peaceful. Can you understand me?"

The large forehead vein of one of the Talosians pulsed strongly and, although Pike could see no lip movement, a voice sounded in his head, a voice that sounded as though it were reciting something.

"It appears, Magistrate, that the intelligence of the specimen is shockingly limited."

Now the forehead of the creature with the pendant pulsed. "This is no surprise, since his vessel was lured here so easily with a simulated message. As you can read in its thoughts, it is only now beginning to suspect that the survivors and the encampment were a simple illusion we placed in their minds. And you will note the confusion as it reads our thought transmissions…"

"All right, telepathy," Pike broke in. "You can read my mind, I can read yours. Now, unless you want my ship to consider capturing me an unfriendly act…"

"You now see the primitive fear-threat reaction. The specimen is about to boast of his strength, the weaponry of his vessel, and so on." As Pike stepped back a pace and tensed himself, the Magistrate added, "Next, frustrated into a need to display physical prowess, the creature will throw himself against the transparency."

Pike, his act predicted in mid-move, felt so foolish that he canceled it, which made him angrier than ever. He snarled,

"There's a way out of every cage, and I'll find it."

"Despite its frustration, the creature appears more adaptable than our specimens from other planets," the Magistrate continued. "We can soon begin the experiment."

Pike wondered what they meant by *that,* but it was already obvious that they were not going to pay any attention to anything he said. He began to pace. The telepathic "voices" continued behind him.

"Thousands of us are now probing the creature's thoughts, Magistrate. We find excellent memory capacity."

"I read most strongly a recent struggle in which it fought to protect its tribal system. We will begin with this, giving the specimen something more interesting to protect."

The cage vanished.

He was standing alone among rocks and strange vegetation which, on second look, proved to be vaguely familiar. Then an unmistakably familiar voice sounded behind him.

"Come. Hurry!"

He turned to see Vina, her hair long and in braids, dressed like a peasant girl of the terrestrial Middle Ages. Behind her towered a fortress which he might have taken as belonging to the same period had he not recognized it instantly. The girl pointed to it and said, "It is deserted. There will be weapons, perhaps food."

"This is Rigel VIII," Pike said slowly. "I fought in that fortress just two weeks ago. But where do you fit in?"

There was a distant bellowing sound. Vina started, then began walking rapidly toward the fortress. Pike remained where he was.

I was in a cell, a cage in some kind of zoo. I'm still there. I just think I see this. They must have reached into my mind, taken the memory of somewhere I've been, something that's happened to me—except that she wasn't in it then.

The bellowing sounded again, nearer. Pike hurried after the girl, catching up with her just inside the gateway to the fortress' courtyard. The place was a scatter of battered shields, lance staves, nicked and snapped swords; there was even a broken catapult—the debris that had been left behind after Pike's own force had breached and reduced the fortress. Breaking the Kalars' hold over their serfs had been a bloody business, and made more so by the hesitancy of Starfleet Command over whether the whole

operation was not in violation of General Order Number One. Luckily, the Kalars themselves had solved that by swarming in from Rigel X in support of their degenerate colony…

And that animal roar of rage behind them could only be a stray Kalar colonist, seeking revenge for the fall of his fortress and his feudalism upon anything in his path. Vina was looking desperately for a weapon amid the debris, but there was nothing here she could even lift.

Then the bellow sounded at the gateway. Vina shrank into the nearest shadow, pulling Pike with her. He was in no mood to hang back; memory was too strong. The figure at the courtyard entry was a local Kalar warrior, huge, hairy, Neanderthal, clad in cuirass and helmet and carrying a mace. It looked about, shoulders hunched.

"What nonsense," Pike said under his breath. "It was all over weeks ago…"

"*Hush,*" Vina whispered, terrified. "You've been here—you know what he'll do to us."

"It's nothing but a damn silly illusion."

The warrior roared again, challengingiy, raising tremendous echoes. Apparently he hadn't seen them yet.

"It doesn't matter *what* you call this," Vina whispered again. "You'll feel it, that's what matters. You'll feel every moment of whatever happens. I'll feel it happening too."

The warrior moved tentatively toward them. Either in genuine panic or to force Pike's hand, Vina whirled and raced for a parapet stairway behind them which lead toward the battlement above. The Kalar spotted her at once; Pike had no choice but to follow.

At the top was another litter of weapons; Vina had already picked up a spear with a head like an assegai. Pike found himself a shield and an unbroken sword. As he straightened, the girl pushed him aside. A huge round rock smashed into the rampart wall inches away from him, the force of the fragments knocking him down.

The pain was real, all right. He raised a hand to his forehead to find it bleeding. Below, the warrior was picking up another rock from a depleted pile on the other side of the catapult.

While Pike scrambled back, Vina threw her spear, but she did it inexpertly, and in any event her strength proved insufficient for the range. Changing his mind at once, the Kalar dropped the stone and came charging up the stairs.

Pike's shield was almost torn from his arm at the first blow of the mace. His own sword clanged harmlessly against the Kalar's armor, and he was driven back by a flurry of blows.

Then there was a twanging sound. The warrior bellowed in pain and swung around, revealing an arrow driven deep into his back. Vina had found a crossbow, cocked and armed, and at that range she couldn't miss.

But the wound wasn't immediately mortal and she obviously did not know how to cock the weapon again. The Kalar, staggering, moved in upon her.

From that close, a crossbow bolt would go through almost any armor, but Pike's sword certainly wouldn't. Dropping it, he sprang forward, raised his shield high, and brought it down with all his strength on the back of the warrior's neck. The creature spun off the rampart edge and plummeted to the floor of the compound below. It struck supine and lay still.

Vina, sobbing with relief, threw herself into Pike's arms…

? and they were back in the menagerie cage.

She was now wearing her own, shorter hair, and a simple garment of the metallic Talosian material. His own bruises and exhaustion had vanished completely, along with the shield. It took him a startled moment to realize what had happened.

Vina smiled. "It's over."

"Why are you here?" he demanded.

She hesitated slightly, then smiled again. "To please you."

"Are you real?"

"As real as you wish."

"That's no answer," he said.

"Perhaps they've made me up out of dreams you've forgotten."

He pointed to her garment. "And I dreamed of you in the same metal fabric they wear?"

"I must wear something." She came closer, "or must I? I can wear anything you wish, be anything you wish…"

"To make this 'specimen' perform for them? To watch how I react? Is that it?"

"Don't you have a dream, something you've wanted very badly…"

"Do they do more than just watch me?" he asked. "Do they *feel* with me too?"

"You can have any dream you wish. I can become anything. Any woman you ever imagined." She tried to nestle closer. "You can go anyplace, do anything—have any experience from the whole universe. Let me please you."

Pike eyed her speculatively. "You can," he said abruptly. "Tell me about them. Is there some way I can keep them from using my own thoughts against me?,Ah, you're frightened. Does that mean there *is* a way?"

"You're being a fool."

He nodded. "You're right. Since you insist you're an illusion, there's not much point in this conversation."

He went over to the bed and lay down, ignoring her. It was not hard to sense her anxiety, however. Whatever her task was, she did not want to fail it.

After a while she said, "Perhaps—if you asked me something I could answer…"

He sat up. "How far can they control my mind?"

"That's not a—that is—" she paused. "If I tell you—will you pick some dream you've had, let me live it with you?"

Pike considered this. The information seemed worth the risk. He nodded.

"They—they can't actually make you do anything you don't want to."

"They have to try to trick me with their illusions?"

"Yes. And they can punish when you're not cooperative. You'll find out about that."

"They must have lived on the planet's surface once…"

"Please," she interrupted. "If I say too much…"

"Why did they move underground?" he pressed insistently.

"War, thousands of centuries ago," she said hurriedly. "The ones left on the surface destroyed themselves and almost their whole world too. It's taken that long for the planet to heal itself."

"And I suppose the ones who came underground found life too limited—so they concentrated on developing their mental power."

She nodded. "But they've found it's a trap. Like a narcotic. When dreams become more important than reality, you give up travel, building, creating, you even forget how to repair the machines left behind by your ancestors. You just sit living and reliving other lives in the thought records. Or probe the minds of zoo specimens, descendants of life they brought back long ago from all over this part of the galaxy."

Pike suddenly understood. "Which means they had to have more than one of each animal."

"Yes," Vina said, clearly frightened now. "Please, you said if I answered your questions…"

"But that was a bargain with something that didn't exist. You said you were an illusion, remember."

"*I'm a woman,*" she said, angry now. "As real and human as you are. We're—like Adam and Eve. If they can…"

She broke off with a scream and dropped to the floor, writhing.

"Please!" she wailed. "Don't punish me—I'm trying my best with him—no, *please*…"

In the midst of her agony, she vanished. Pike looked up to see the creature called the Magistrate watching through the panel. Furiously, he turned his back—and noticed for the first time an almost invisible circular seam, about man-high, in the wall beside his bed. Was there a hidden panel there?

A small clink of sound behind him made him turn again. A vial of blue liquid was sitting on the floor, just inside the transparency. The Magistrate continued to watch; his mental speech said, "The vial contains a nourishing protein complex."

"Is the keeper actually communicating with one of his animals?"

"If the form and color are not appealing, it can appear as any food you wish to visualize."

"And if I prefer—" Pike began.

"To starve? You overlook the unpleasant alternative of punishment."

With the usual suddenness, Pike found himself writhing in bubbling, sulphurous brimstone in a dark place obscured by smoke. Flame licked at him from all sides. The instant agony was as real as the surprise, and a scream was wrenched from him.

It lasted only a few seconds and then he was back in the cage, staggering.

"From a fable you once heard in childhood," the Magistrate said. "You will now consume the nourishment."

"Why not just put irresistable—hunger in my mind?" Pike said, still gasping with remembered pain. "You can't—do that. You do have limitations, don't you?"

"If you continue to disobey, deeper in your mind there are things even more unpleasant."

Shakily, Pike picked up the vial and swallowed its contents. Almost simultaneously he tossed the vial aside and threw himself

at the transparency. It bounced him back, of course—but the Magistrate had also stepped back a pace.

"That's very interesting," Pike said. "You were startled. Weren't you reading my mind then?"

"Now, to the female. As you have conjectured, an Earth vessel did actually crash on our planet. But with only a single survivor."

"Let's stay on the first subject. All I wanted for that moment was to get my hands around your neck. Do primitive emotions put up a block you can't read through?"

"We repaired the survivor's injuries and found the species interesting. So it became necessary to attract a mate."

"All right, we'll talk about the girl. You seem to be going out of your way to make her seem attractive, to make me feel protective."

"This is necessary in order to perpetuate the species."

"That could be done medically, artificially," Pike said. "No, it seems more important to you now that I accept her, begin to like her…"

"We wish our specimens to be happy in their new life."

"Assuming that's another lie, why would you want me attracted to her? So I'll feel love, a husband-wife relationship? That would be necessary only if you needed to build a family group, or even a whole human…"

"With the female now properly conditioned, we will continue with…"

"You mean properly punished!" Pike shouted. "I'm the one who's not cooperating. Why don't you punish me?"

"First an emotion of protectiveness, now one of sympathy. Excellent." The Magistrate turned and walked away down the corridor. Frustrated again, Pike turned to study the mysterious seam.

He found himself studying a tree instead. Around him, in full day, was richly planted park and forest land, with a city on the horizon. He recognized the place instantly.

Immediately to his right was tethered a pair of handsome saddle horses. To the left, Vina, in casual Earth garb, was laying out a picnic lunch on the grass.

Looking up at him, smiling, she said, "I left the thermos hooked to my saddle."

Pike went to the horses and patted them. "Tango! You old quarter-gaited devil, you! Hello, Mary Lou! No, sorry, no sugar this

time…"

But patting his pockets automatically, he was astonished to find the usual two sugar cubes there. He fed them to the horses. The Talosians seemed to think of everything.

He unhooked the thermos, carried it to the picnic and sat down, eyeing Vina curiously. She seemed nervous.

"Is it good to be home?" she asked him.

"I've been aching to be back here. They read our minds very well."

"*Please!*" It was a cry of fear. Her face pleaded with him to keep silent.

"Home, everything else I want," he said. "*If* I cooperate. Is that it?"

"Have you forgotten my—headaches, darling? The doctor said when you talk strangely like this…"

Her voice trailed off, shaken. Pike was beginning to feel trapped again.

"Look, I'm sorry they punish you," he said. "But I can't let them hold that over our heads. They'll *own* us then."

She continued to lay out the lunch, trying to ignore him. "My, it turned out to be a beautiful day, didn't it?"

"Funny," he mused. "About twenty-four hours ago I was telling the ship's doctor how much I wanted—something not so far from what's being offered here. No responsibility, no frustrations or bruises… And now that I have it, I understand the doctor's answer. You either *live* life, bruises and all, or you turn your back on it and start dying. The Talosians went the second way."

"I hope you're hungry," Vina said, with false brightness. "The white sandwiches are your mother's chicken-tuna recipe."

He tried one. She was right. "Doc would be happy about part of this, at least. Said I needed a rest."

"This is a lovely place to rest."

"I spent my boyhood here. Doesn't compare with the gardens around the big cities, but I liked it better." He nodded toward the distant skyline. "That's Mojave. I was born there."

Vina laughed. "Is that supposed to be news to your wife? See—you're home! You can even stay if you want. Wouldn't it be nice showing your children where you once played?"

"These—'headaches', " Pike said. "They'll be hereditary. Would you wish them on a child—or a whole group of children?"

"That's foolish."

"Is it? Look, first I'm made to protect you, then to feel sympathy for you—and now familiar surroundings, comfortable husband and wife feelings. They don't need all this just for passion. They're after respect, affection, mutual dependence—and something else…"

"They say in the old days all this was a desert. Blowing sand, cactus…"

"I can't help either of us if you won't give me a chance!" Pike said sharply. "You told me once that illusions have become like a narcotic to them. They've even forgotten how to repair the machines left by their ancestors. Is that why we're so important? To build a colony of slaves who can…"

"Stop it, stop it! Don't you care what they do to me?"

"There's no such thing as a perfect prison," Pike said. "There's always some way out. Back in my cage, it seemed for a couple of minutes our keeper couldn't read my thoughts. Do emotions like anger block off our thought from them?"

"Don't you think," Vina said angrily, "that I've already tried things like that?"

"There's *some* way to beat them. Answer me!"

Her anger turned to tears. "Yes, they can't read—through primitive emotions. But you can't keep it up long enough. I've tried!" She began to sob. "They—keep at you and—at you, year after year—probing, looking for a weakness, and tricking—and punishing and—they've won. They own me. I know you hate me for it."

Her fear, desperation, loneliness, everything that she had undergone were welling up in misery, deep and genuine. He put an arm around her. "I don't hate you. I can guess what it was like."

"It's not enough! They want you to have feelings that would build a family, protect it, work for it. Don't you understand? They read my thoughts, my desires, my dreams of what would be a perfect man. That's why they picked you. *I can't help but love you.* And they expect you to feel the same way."

Pike was shaken despite himself. The story was all too horribly likely. "If they can read my mind, they know I'm attracted to you. From the first day in the survivor's encampment. You were like a wild little animal."

"Was that the reason? Because I was like a barbarian?"

"Perhaps," Pike said, amused.

"I'm beginning to see why none of this has really worked on you," Vina said, straightening. "You've *been* home. And fighting, like on Rigel, that's not new to you either. A person's strongest dreams are about things he *can't do.*"

"Maybe so. I'm no psychologist."

"Yes," she said, smiling, almost to herself. "A ship's captain, always having to be so formal, so decent and honest and proper—he must wonder what it would be like to forget all that."

The scene changed, with a burst of music and wild merriment. The transition caught him still seated. He was now on a pillowed floor at a low round table bearing a large bowl of fruit and goblets of wine. He seemed to be clad now in rich silk robes, almost like that of an Oriental potentate; near him sat a man whom he vaguely remembered as an Earth trader, similarly but less luxuriantly garbed, while on the other side was an officer in Starfleet uniform whom he did not recognize at all. All of them were being served by women whose garb and manner strongly suggested slavery, and whose skins were the same color as Spock's. The music was coming from a quartet seated near a fountain pool.

Again he recognized the place; it was the courtyard of the Potentate of Orion. The officer leaned forward.

"Say, Pike," he said. "You used to be Captain of the *Enterprise,* didn't you?"

"Matter of fact, he was," said the trader.

"Thought so. You stopped here now and then—to check things out, so to speak."

"And then," the trader added, "sent Earth a blistering report on 'the Orion traders taking shocking advantage of the natives.' "

Both men laughed. "Funny how they are on this planet," the officer said. "They actually like being taken advantage of."

"And not just in profits, either."

The officer looked around appraisingly. "Nice place you've got here, Mr Pike."

"It's a start," the trader said. Both laughed again. The officer patted the nearest slave girl on the rump.

"Do any of you have a green one?" he asked. "They're dangerous, I hear. Razor-sharp claws, and they attract a man like a sensation of irresistible hunger."

Up to now, the officer had simply repelled Pike, but that last phrase sounded familiar—and had been delivered with mysterious

emphasis. The trader gave Pike a knowing look.

"Now and then," he said, "comes a man who tames one."

There was a change in the music; it became louder, took on a slow, throbbing rhythm. The slave girls turned hurriedly, as if suddenly anxious to escape. Looking toward the musicians, Pike saw another girl, nude, her skin green, and glistening as if it had been oiled, kneeling at the edge of the pool. Her fingertips were long, gleaming, razor-edged scimitars; her hair like the mane of a wild animal. She was staring straight at him.

One of the slaves was slow. The green girl sprang up with a sound like a spitting cat, barring her escape. A man Pike had not seen before leapt forward to intervene, raising a whip.

"Stop!" Pike shouted, breaking his paralysis. The green girl turned and looked at him again, and then he recognized her. It was Vina once more.

She came forward to the center of the rectangle and posed for a moment. Then the music seemed to reach her, the slow surging beat forcing movement out of her as a reed flute takes possession of a cobra. She threw her head back, shrieked startlingly, and began to dance.

"Where'd he find her?" said the officer's voice. Pike was unable to tear his eyes away from her.

"He'd stumbled into a dark corridor," the trader's voice said, "and then he saw flickering light ahead. Almost like secret dreams a bored sea captain might have, wasn't it? There she was, holding a torch, glistening green…"

"Strange looks she keeps giving you, Pike."

"Almost as if she knows something about you."

Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that the Talosians were baiting him through these two men; but he could not stop watching the dance.

"Wouldn't you say that's worth a man's soul?" said the trader.

"It makes you believe she could be anything," said the officer. "Suppose you had all of space to choose from, and this was only one small sample…"

That was too much. Pike rose, growling. "Get out of my way, blast you!"

He crossed the courtyard to a curtained doorway which he seemed to recall was an exit. Brushing the curtains aside, he found himself in a corridor. It was certainly dark, and grew darker

as he strode angrily along it. In the distance was a flickering light, and then, there indeed was Vina, holding aloft a torch…

The scene lightened and the torch vanished. Vina, her skin white, her body covered with the Talosian garment, continued to hold her empty hand aloft for a second. They were back in the cage.

Vina's face contorted in fury. She ran to the transparency and pounded on it, shouting out into the corridor.

"No! Let us finish! I could have…"

"What's going on here?" another woman's voice' demanded. Both Pike and Vina whirled.

There were two other women in the cage: Number One, and Yeoman Colt. After so many shocks, Pike could summon no further reaction to this one.

"I might well ask you the same thing," he said numbly.

"We tried to Transport down in here," Number One said. "There was a risk we'd materialize in solid rock, but we'd already tried blasting open the top of the lift, with no luck."

"But there were six of us to start with," Yeoman Colt said. "I don't know why the others didn't make it."

"It's not fair!" Vina said to Pike. "You don't need them."

"They may be just what I need," Pike said drily, beginning to recover some of his wits. "Number One, Yeoman, hand me those phasers."

They passed the weapons over. He examined them. What he found did not particularly surprise him. "Empty."

"They were fully charged when we left," Number One said.

"No doubt. But you'll find your communicators don't work either." A thought struck him. He looked quickly toward the almost circular panel he had found before. Then, suddenly, he hurled both phasers at it.

"What good does that do?" Number One said coolly.

"Don't talk to me. Don't say anything. I'm working up a hate—filling my mind with a picture of beating their huge, misshapen heads to a pulp. Thoughts so primitive they shut everything else out. I hate them—do you understand?"

"How long can you block your thoughts?" Vina said. "A few minutes, an hour? How can that help you?"

Pike concentrated, trying to pay no attention to her. She turned on the two other women.

"He doesn't need you," she said, with jealous anger she did not have to force-feed. "He's already picked me."

"Picked you for what?" Colt asked.

Vina looked at her scornfully. "Now there's a great chance for intelligent offspring."

" 'Offspring?' " Colt echoed. "As in 'children' "?

"As in he's 'Adam,' " Number One said, indicating Pike. "Isn't that it?"

"You're no better choice. They'd have better luck crossing him with a computer!"

"Shall I compute your age?" Number One said. "You were listed on that expedition as an adult crewman. Now, adding eighteen years to that…"

She broke off as Vina turned to the transparency. The Magistrate was back. The two crewwomen stared at him with interest.

"It's not fair," Vina said. "I did everything you asked."

The Magistrate ignored her. "Since you resist the present specimen," he said to Pike, "you now have a selection."

Pike threw himself at the impervious figure. "I'll break out, get to you somehow!" he shouted. "Is your blood red like ours? I'm going to find out!"

"Each of the two new specimens has qualities in her favor. The female you call 'Number One' has the superior mind and would produce highly intelligent offspring. Although she seems to lack emotion, this is largely a pretense. She often has fantasies involving you."

Number One looked flustered for the first time in Pike's memory, but he turned this, too, into rage at the invasion of her privacy. "All I want is to get my hands on you! Can you read these thoughts? Images of hate, killing…"

"The other new arrival has considered you unreachable, but is now realizing that this has changed. The factors in her favor are youth and strength, plus an unusually strong female emotion which…"

"You'll find my thoughts more interesting! Primitive thoughts you can't understand; emotions so ugly you can't…"

The pain hit him then and he went down, writhing. The images involved this time were from the torture chambers of the Inquisition. Over them, dimly, floated the Magistrate's thought, as though directed at someone else.

"Wrong thinking is punishable; right thinking will be as quickly rewarded. You will find it an effective combination."

The illusion vanished and Pike rolled weakly to a sitting position. He found the Magistrate gone, and the two crewwomen bending over him.

"No—don't—help me. Just leave me alone. Got to concentrate on hate. They can't read through it."

The hours wore on and eventually the lights went down. It seemed obvious that the Talosians intended to keep all three women penned with him. Trying to keep the hate alive became increasingly more difficult; he slammed his fist against the enclosure wall again and again, hoping the pain would help.

The women conversed in low tones for a while, and then, one by one, fell asleep, Vina on the bed, the other two on the floor leaning against it. Pike squatted against the wall nearby, no thoughts in his mind now but roaring fatigue and the effort to fight it.

Then he sensed, rather than heard movement at his side. The wall panel had opened, and a Talosian arm was reaching in for the discarded phasers. He exploded into action, grabbing the arm and heaving.

The Magistrate was almost catapulted into the room by the force of that yank. Instantly, Pike's hands were around his throat.

"Don't hurt him!" Vina cried from the bed. "They don't mean to be evil…"

"I've had some samples of how 'good' they are…"

The Talosian vanished and Pike found himself holding the neck of the snarling anthropoid-spider creature he had first seen in a cell across from his. Its fangs snapped at his face. Colt shrieked.

Pike grimly tightened his grip. "I'm still holding your neck! Stop this illusion or I'll snap it!" The spider-thing changed back into the Magistrate again. "That's better. Try one more illusion—try anything at all—I'll take one quick twist. Understand?"

He loosened his hands slightly, allowing the Magistrate to gasp for breath. The forehead vein throbbed. "Your ship. Release me or we destroy it."

"He's not bluffing," Vina said. "With illusions they can make your crew work the wrong controls, push any button it takes to destroy the ship."

"I'll gamble he's too intelligent to kill for no reason at all. On the other hand, *I've* got a reason. Number One, take a good grip on his throat for me. And at the slightest excuse…"

"I understand, Captain," Number One said grimly.

Freed, Pike picked up the phasers. Putting one into his belt, he adjusted the other, leveled it at the transparency, and pulled the trigger. As he expected, it didn't fire. He turned back to the Magistrate and pressed the weapon against his head.

"I'm betting," he said almost conversationally, "that you've created an illusion that this phaser is empty. That you don't know enough about your own machines, let alone ours, to dare to tamper with them. And that this one just blasted a hole in that wall which you're keeping us from seeing. Shall I test my theory on your head?"

The Magistrate closed his eyes resignedly. At once, there was a huge, jagged hole in the front of the cage.

"Q.E.D. Number One, you can let go of him now. If he acts up, I can shoot him, and he knows it. Everybody out. We're leaving!"

On the surface, only the top of the lift shaft still stood; the top of the knoll had been blasted clean off. So the Talosians had prevented the rescue party from seeing that, too.

Number One tried her communicator, but without effect. Noting the Magistrate's forehead vein throbbing again, Pike raised his phaser and said in a voice of iron, "I want contact with my ship. *Right now.*"

"No," said the Magistrate. "You are now on the surface where we intended you to be in the end. With the female of your choice, you will soon begin carefully guided lives…"

"Beginning with burying you."

"I see you intend to kill. I shall not prevent you; others of us will replace me. To help you reclaim the planet, our zoological gardens will furnish a variety of plant life…"

"Look," Pike said, "I'll make a deal with you. You and your life for the lives of these two Earthwomen."

"Since our life span is many times yours, we have time to evolve a society trained as artisans, technicans…"

"Do you understand what I'm saying? Give me proof our ship is all right, send these two back to it, and I'll stay here with Vina."

He felt a tug at his belt, and out of the corner of his eye saw that Number One had pulled the spare phaser out of it. The rachet popped like firecrackers as she turned the gain control full around.

The phaser began to hum, rising in both pitch and volume. The weapon was building up an overload—a force chamber explosion.

"It's wrong," Number One said, "to create a whole race of humans to live as slaves. Do you concur, Captain?"

After a moment of hesitation, Pike nodded.

"Is this a deception?" asked the Magistrate. "Do you really intend to destroy yourselves? Yes, I see that you do."

"Vina, you've got time to get back underground. But hurry. And Talosian, to show just how primitive humans are, you can go with her."

The Magistrate did not move, nor did Vina.

"No," she said. "If you all think it's this important, then I can't leave either. I suppose if they still have one human, they might try again."

"We had not believed this possible," the Magistrate said, his thoughts betraying what might have been a strange sadness. "The customs and history of your race show a unique hatred of captivity, even when pleasant and benevolent. But you prefer death. This makes you too violent and dangerous a species for our needs."

"He means," Vina said, "they can't use you. You're free to go back to your ship."

Number One turned the phaser off, and just in time, too. In the renewed silence, Pike said, "Vina, that's it. No apologies. You captured one of us, threatened us, tortured us…"

"Your unsuitability has condemned the Talosian race to eventual death," the Magistrate said. "Is this not sufficient? No other specimens have shown your adaptability. You were our last hope."

"Nonsense," Pike said, surprised. "Surely some form of trade, some mutual cooperation…"

The Magistrate shook his head. "Your race would learn our power of illusion—and destroy itself. It is important to *our* beliefs to prevent this."

"Captain," Number One said, "we have Transporter control now."

"Good. Let's go. Vina, you too."

"I—" Vina said. "I can't go with you."

Pike felt a flash of what might almost have been exasperation. "Number One, Yeoman Colt, go aloft. I'll be with you when I've gotten to the bottom of this." As they hesitated, he added, "Orders."

They shimmered and vanished. Pike swung on Vina. "Now…"

He stopped, astounded and horrified. Vina was changing. Her face was wrinkling. An ugly scar appeared. Her body was becoming cruelly deformed. Throughout, she looked back at Pike with bitter eyes. The change did not stop until she was old, shockingly twisted, downright ugly.

"This is the female's true appearance," the Magistrate said.

It couldn't be true. *This* was the youngster of the survivors' camp, the sturdy peasant, the wife on Earth, the green Orionese savage who had danced so…

"This is the truth," Vina said, in an old woman's voice. She lifted her arms. "See me as I am. They found me in the wreckage, dying, nothing but a lump of flesh. They fixed me fine. Everything works. But—*they had no guide for putting me back together.*

"Do you understand now? Do you see why I can't go with you?"

She turned and stumbled toward the lift. Pike watched her go with horror and pity. Then he turned to the Magistrate, who said; "It was necessary to convince you that her desire to stay is an honest one."

Pike looked at him with new eyes. "You have some sparks of decency in you after all. Will you give her back her illusion of beauty?"

"We will. And more. See."

At the shaft, the image of the lovely Vina was entering the lift—*accompanied by himself.* The two turned and waved. Then the lift carried them down into the bowels of Talos IV.

"She has her illusion," the Magistrate said. Was he almost smiling? "And you have reality. May you find your way as pleasant."

Spock, Number One, Jose, Colt and Boyce all crowded toward him as he stepped out of the Transporter Chamber.

"What happened to Vina?" Colt demanded.

"Isn't she—coming with us?" asked Number One.

"No," Pike said shortly. "And I agree with her reasons. Now break it up here. What is this we're running, a cadet ship? Everybody on the bridge! Navigator, I want a course!"

"Yessir!"

They scattered like flushed partridges—all except Boyce, who said, "Hold on a minute, Captain."

"What for? I feel fine."

"That's the trouble. You look a hundred per cent better."

"I am. Didn't you recommend rest and change? I've had both. I've even been—home. Now, let's get on with things."

As the *Enterprise* moved away from Talos IV, routine re-established itself quickly, and the memory of all those illusions began to fade. They had not, after all, been real experiences—most of them. But Pike could not resist stealing a quick look from Number One to Colt, wondering which of them, in other circumstances, he might have picked.

When he found them both looking at him as if with the same speculation, he turned his eyes determinedly to the viewscreen and banished the thought.

He had had plenty of practice at that, lately.

WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE BEFORE

(Samuel A. Peeples)

Star date 1312.5 was a memorable one for the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. It marked the day of its first venture beyond the frontier of Earth's galaxy. The screen in its Briefing Room was already showing a strange vista—thinning stars etched against a coming night of depthless darkness broken only by the milky spots of phosphorescence which defined the existence of further galaxies millions of light years distant.

Kirk and Spock, a chessboard between them, looked away from the board to fix their eyes on the screen's center. It held, invisibly, an object detected by the *Enterprise* sensors; an object that was impossibly emitting the call letters of a starship known to be missing for two centuries.

Spock said, "Your move, Captain."

"We should be intercepting that thing now," Kirk said, frowning. "The bridge said they'd call…"

"? any minute now." Spock finished the sentence for him. "I'll have you checkmated in your next move, sir."

"Have I ever mentioned that you play irritating chess, Mr Spock?"

"Irritating? Ah yes, one of your Earth's emotions, I believe."

But Kirk had seen an opening for his bishop. Pouncing on the piece, he moved it. Spock's eyebrows went up.

"Certain that you don't know what irritation is?" Kirk asked.

Spock glowered at the board. "The fact that one of my ancestors was a human female is one, sir, I cannot…"

"Terrible, having bad blood like that," Kirk said sympathetically. "In addition to being checkmated, it could be called intolerable."

But the voice of Lieutenant Lee Kelso was speaking from the intercom. "Bridge to Briefing Room. Object now within tractor beam range, Captain."

"No visual contact yet, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. Can't be a vessel. Reads only about one meter in diameter. Small enough to bring it aboard—if you want to risk it."

Kirk decided to risk it. It was a curious encounter on the edge of illimitable space. Curious—and just possibly informative. "The Transporter Room. Let's go, Mr Spock," he said.

Scott was waiting for them at the console. "Materializer ready, sir, when you are."

"Bring it aboard," Kirk said.

The familiar hum came. And, with it, the platform's familiar shimmer, finally solidifying into the spherical shape of an old-style starship's recorder. Squatting on tripod legs, it stood about three feet in height, its metal surface seared, pockmarked. But it still identified itself by letters that read "U.S.S. *Valiant*"; and in smaller ones beneath them, "Galactic Survey Cruiser."

Kirk said, "That old-time variety of recorder could be ejected when something threatened its ship."

"In this case more probably destroyed its ship, sir," Spock said. "Look how it's burnt and pitted."

Kirk was approaching the platform when Scott said sharply, "Take care, sir! That thing's radioactive!"

Kirk stopped. "The Q signal, Mr Scott."

Scott hit a button on his console. It beeped shrilly. As a pulsating glow enveloped the recorder, its antennae moved out and clicked into position.

"It's transmitting," Scott said.

"Interesting," said Spock. "I have a recorder monitoring…"

He was interrupted by Kelso's voice from the intercom. "All decks, six minutes to galaxy edge."

The galaxy's edge—where, as far as anyone knew, no man had ever gone before. Of course, there was no neat boundary to the edge of the galaxy; it just gradually thinned out. But in six minutes, the last of its stars and systems would be behind them.

"Yellow alert," Kirk said.

"Captain's orders—yellow alert, all decks," Kelso relayed it.

A moment later, an elevator slid open to emit Lieutenant Commander Gary Mitchell, now senior helmsman since Sulu had become ship's physicist. The promotion had won widespread approval—unnecessary, of course, but helpful; Mitchell was a popular officer. But during a yellow alert his normal chore was monitoring the artificial gravity system as well as the helm.

"Everything's in order, Jim," he said with a grin, as if reading Kirk's mind. "Kelso's voice sounded so nervous, I figured you'd left the bridge. Finish the game, Spock?"

"The Captain plays most illogically," the Science Officer complained. "I expected him to move his castle."

Kirk laughed, making a throat cutting gesture for Mitchell's benefit. It was clear that the two were old, warm friends. In the bridge all three hurried to their positions. "Relieving you, Mr Alden," Mitchell told the junior helmsman.

"Screen on," Kirk said. "Lieutenant Kelso, how far now to the galaxy edge?"

"Four minutes to our jumping-off point, sir."

"Alert off, Lieutenant Kelso." He turned to Mitchell. "Neutralize warp, Commander. Hold this position."

As the heavy throb of the ship's powerful engines eased, the bridge elevator opened. First to step out of it was Dr Elizabeth Dehner, tall, slim, in her mid-twenties, a potentially beautiful woman if she had cared to be one, which she didn't. Other professional personnel followed her—senior physician, Dr Piper, physicist Sulu, Engineering Chief Scott. Turning to Mitchell, Kirk said, "Address intercraft."

"Intercraft open, sir."

Kirk seized his speaker. "This is the Captain speaking. The object we encountered is a ship's disaster recorder, apparently ejected from the U.S.S. *Valiant* almost two hundred years ago. Mr Spock is now exploring its memory banks. We hope to learn how the *Valiant* got this far, whether it probed out of the galaxy and what destroyed the vessel. As soon as we have those answers, we'll begin our own probe. All decks stand by." He paused a moment. "All department heads, check in, as per rota."

"Astro Sciences standing by, Captain," Sulu said.

"Engineering divisions ready as always," Scott's voice said cheerfully. Nothing, not even the awesome void now before them, could check his Gaelic self-assurance for long.

"Life Sciences ready, sir," Dr Piper's voice reported. He was temporary—McCoy was on a special study leave—and rather an elderly man for Starfleet service, but he seemed to be a competent enough physician. "Request permission to bring to the bridge my special assistant, Dr Dehner."

Elizabeth Dehner had joined the expedition at the Aldebaran colony; Kirk had not yet had much chance to talk to her, and now

was not the time. But she might be interested in the abyss now opening before them all. "Granted."

The two appeared within a minute. Kirk said, "Dr Dehner, you're a psychiatrist, I'm told, assigned to study crew reactions under extreme conditions."

"Quite correct, Captain."

Kirk gestured at the screen. "There's an extreme condition. Millions upon millions of light years of absolutely nothing, except a few molecules of ionized gas."

Spock called from his station. "Getting something from the recorder now, Captain."

But Dr Elizabeth Dehner had more to say. "Sir, I shall be interested, too, in how the *Valiant's* crew reacted to disaster."

Kirk eyed her curiously. Mitchell also appraised her, a little smile on his handsome face. "You want to improve the breed, Doctor?"

"I've heard that's more your own specialty, Commander," she said icily.

"Sock!" Mitchell murmured to Kelso. "It's a walking refrigerator, by gum!" She overheard him. A flush crept up and over her composed features.

Coded electronic beeps were sounding from the listening device Spock had applied to the recorder. He looked up as Kirk joined him. "Decoding memory banks," he said. "Captain's log now—reports the *Valiant* encountered a magnetic space storm that swept it back into this direction."

Kirk nodded. "The old impulse engines weren't strong enough to resist a thing like that."

Spock was leaning closer to his listener. "The storm flung it past this point? about a half light year out of the galaxy… they were thrown clear of the storm… then they seem to have headed back into the galaxy." He made a control adjustment. "I'm not getting it all. It sounds as though the ship were struggling with some unknown force."

The beeps grew louder. Interpreting, Spock said, "Confusion now… orders and counterorders… emergency power drains… repeated urgent requests for information from the ship's computer records." He stopped to look up at Kirk again. "They want to know everything there is to know about ESP in human beings!" He shook his head. "Odd, that. Very odd indeed."

"Extrasensory perception!" Kirk was incredulous. But he motioned to Elizabeth Dehner. "Dr Dehner, what do you know about ESP?"

She went to the computer station. "In tests I've taken, my ESP rated rather high."

Kirk said, "I asked what you *know* about ESP."

She spoke with the pomp of the pedant. "It is a fact some people can sense future events, read the backs of playing cards and so on. But the Esper ability is always quite limited…"

Spock broke in. "Severe damage—no, make that severe injuries." His face was strained with listening concentration. "Seven crewmen dead… no, make that *six*—one crewman recovered." He looked up at Kirk once more. "It's the casualties that appear to have stimulated the interest in extrasensory perception. Interest is the wrong word. It seems to be driving them frantic."

Bent to the listener again, he suddenly stiffened. "No, this must be garbled. I'm getting something about 'Destruct.' " Frowning, he removed the earphone. "I must have read it incorrectly. It sounded as though the Captain had ordered the destruction of his own ship!"

Kirk turned questioningly to the department heads.

"You heard," he said. "Comments?"

Piper shrugged. "The only fact we have for sure is that the *Valiant* was destroyed."

"The fact," Kirk said, "which is the best argument to continue *our* probe. Other vessels will be heading out here someday—and they'll have to know what they'll be facing."

He strode back to his command chair. "Commander Mitchell, ahead, warp factor one," he said. "We are leaving the galaxy."

As the *Enterprise* moved past the last stars, the bridge alarm light flashed. All eyes turned to the large viewing screen. Against the blackness of deep space a wispy pattern of colors was building up ahead of the ship.

Spock said, "Force field of some kind."

Mitchell said, "Whatever it is, we're coming up on it fast."

Kirk said nothing. Though distance from the phenomenon made certain judgment dangerous, it seemed to be some variety of impalpable barrier. Its colors were growing brighter, extending, interweaving into what appeared to a flaring, multicolored, massive curtain of pure energy. It might have been a monstrous space version of Earth's Aurora Borealis. And it was sending the bridge alarm siren into shrieks of warning.

He stared at it, hard jawed. Its colors, radiating from the screen, rippled across the strained faces around him.

The auroral colors were blazing now. Suddenly, with a muted crackle, a circuit shorted.

"Field intensity rising…" Spock began.

As he spoke, the bridge lights died. For several seconds Kirk didn't notice their loss, the radiance from the screen had simultaneously become so brilliant that hands were rising instinctively to shield dazzled eyes.

Then a blinding whip of pure white light shot from the screen. At the same moment, an entire instrument panel went out in a shower of sparks and smoke. Another promptly shorted, with an angry crackle. The whole bridge seemed to be hazed in flying sparks. Elizabeth Dehner screamed and fell to the deck, writhing as if in the grip of some uncontrollable energy. Once down, she kept on screaming. The dial needles on Kirk's command board whirled.

"Helmsman!"

But the sparks had invaded Mitchell, too. Jerking like a marionette pulled, by a madman's strings, he staggered to his feet and then went rigid. With a last galvanic convulsion, he toppled to the deck, inert, unconscious. His body rolled as the ship shuddered.

The confusion mounted, shock after shock, now joined by the mindless hysteria of the alarm siren. Kirk and Spock clung to their chairs; most of the others had been jolted out of theirs.

In the end, discipline triumphed while technology failed all around them. Painfully, inch by inch, Kirk dragged himself back to his command control panel. Kelso crawled over to his. Spock, stepping over the crumpled Mitchell, took over his helmsman's station. But the battering continued. Wrenched metal screeched as the *Enterprise* fought to hold itself together.

"Lateral power!" Kirk shouted. "*Crash speed. Take her out of this!*"

Spock and Kelso wrestled with controls. Power returned to the shaking ship. The bridge lights glimmered back on. The alarm siren quieted. But many of the instrument panels were dead with their circuits. Smoke from one still drifted through the bridge.

Kirk got to his feet. "Take damage reports, Mr Spock."

Spock relayed the order to the ship's crew—and Piper lifted Elizabeth's head. Clinging to his arm, she climbed shakily to her

feet. “Something hit me like an electrical charge,” she whispered. Piper left her to go to Mitchell.

“Well?” Kirk asked.

“He’s alive. Appears to be in shock.”

Spock made his damage report. “Our main engines are out, Captain. We’re on emergency power cells. Casualties—seven dead.”

A moment prolonged itself. Then Kirk said, “Perhaps we are fortunate.”

“Commander Mitchell is moving, sir,” Spock said.

Kirk dropped to a knee beside his senior helmsman. “Gary! How do you feel?”

Mitchell’s arm covered his eyes as though the screen’s radiance still dazzled them. “Jim? Weak as a kitten—but better now. I think I’ll live.”

He moved the arm from his eyes. Their blue had turned into a gleaming metallic silver.

No amount of technical resourcefulness could repair the damage suffered by the crippled *Enterprise*. Moving now on impulse power alone, its dim bridge lights gave everybody the measure of the havoc. Kirk, considering his burned-out engines, remembered the burned recorder ejected by the *Valiant*. Had it survived the onslaught by that merciless radiation? If it had, what happened afterwards?

On his computer station screen, Spock was busily flashing the names of certain members of the ship’s personnel. Among them were those of Elizabeth Dehner and Gary Mitchell. Noting them, Kirk gave Spock a sober look. Spock hastily flashed off Elizabeth’s name as she approached them.

“Autopsy report, Captain,” she said. “Each case showed damage to the body’s neural circuits—an area of the brain burned out.”

“And you?” Kirk said. “Feeling all right now?”

“Much better. And Commander Mitchell is, too, except for the eyes. We’re trying to find a reason for those. And why, of all the people in the crew, only certain ones were affected.”

Spock spoke quietly. “I think we have found that answer.”

“You said that tests show you have a high degree of extrasensory perception, Doctor,” Kirk reminded her.

"The others who were affected have it, too. Gary Mitchell has the highest ESP rating of all."

She was clearly puzzled. "I suppose it's conceivable the Esper ability attracted some force." Then she shrugged. "But if you're suggesting there's something dangerous in that…"

Spock interrupted. "Before the *Valiant* was destroyed, its Captain was frantically searching for ESP information on his crew members."

"Espers are merely people who have flashes of—well, insight," she said.

"Aren't there also those who seem able to see through solid objects?" Spock asked. "Or can cause fires to start spontaneously?"

The question irritated her. "ESP is nothing more than a sort of sixth sense. There's nothing about it that can make a person dangerous!"

"I take it you're speaking of normal ESP power, Doctor," Spock said.

"Perhaps you know of another kind!" she flared.

Kirk intervened. "Do you know for sure, Doctor, that there isn't another kind?"

An angry disdain sharpened her voice. "I have work to do," she said. "You must excuse me." She left them to move quickly to the elevator.

In Sickbay, Mitchell, propped up against pillows, was sufficiently recovered to use his reading viewer. The eyes that followed its turning pages were as gleamingly silver as quicksilver. Kirk, entering, watched him read for a long moment. Without looking up, Mitchell snapped off the reading viewer to say, "Hello, Jim."

He hadn't even been obliged to turn his head to identify his caller. For some reason this realization troubled Kirk. He sat down in the chair beside the bed. "Hey, you look worried," Mitchell said.

Kirk forced a smile. "I've been worried about you since that girl on Deneb IV."

Mitchell nodded reminiscently. "She was a nova, that one," he said. "But there's nothing to worry about. Except for the eyes, I'm fine." He grinned his charming grin. "They kind of stare back at me when I'm shaving."

"Vision all right?"

"Twenty-twenty."

"Nothing else, Gary?"

Mitchell looked up curiously at Kirk's tone. "Like what, for instance?"

"Do you—feel any different in yourself?"

"In a way, I feel better than I ever felt before in my life." He paused. "It actually seems to have done me some good."

"Oh. How?"

Mitchell gestured toward the reading viewer. "I'm getting a chance to bone up on some of that longhair stuff you like. Man, I remember you at the Academy! A stack of books with legs! The first thing I heard from upper classmen was 'Watch out for Lieutenant Kirk! In his class you either *think*—or you sink.' "

"Oh, come on," Kirk said. "I wasn't that bad."

"You weren't *what?*" Mitchell laughed. "Do you remember almost washing me out?"

"I sort of leaned on cadets I liked," Kirk said.

"Man, if I hadn't aimed that little blond lab technician at you…"

"You what?" Kirk stared at him. "You mean you actually *planned* that?"

"You wanted me to *think*, didn't you? So I *thought*. I outlined her whole campaign for her."

Kirk found it hard to return the grin. "Gary, I almost married her!"

"I sort of lean, too, on people I like. She said you came through great."

Kirk, remembering, struggled with his dismay. He repeated, "Gary, I almost *married* her."

"Better be good to me," Mitchell said. He pointed again to the reading viewer. "I'm getting even better ideas from *that*."

Kirk looked at the tape on the viewer. "Spinoza?"

"That's one," Mitchell said. "Once you get into him, he's simple. Childish, almost. By the way, I don't agree with him at all."

"No?" Kirk said. "Go on."

"Go on where? So I'm finally doing some reading." The cold, silver glitter of his eyes made an uncomfortable contrast with the easy warmth of his manner. His white teeth flashed again in the charming grin. "I'm saying I'm fine! When do I go back on duty?"

Kirk hesitated. "I want Dr Dehner to keep you under observation for a while yet."

Mitchell groaned. "With almost a hundred women on board, you choose *that* one to hang around me!"

"Think of it as a challenge," Kirk said.

The silver eyes fixed on him. "That's not so friendly, James, my friend. Didn't I say you'd better be good to me?"

The mutually gauging moment passed. Finally Mitchell shook his head in mock resignation. Then he pointedly turned back to the reading viewer. Kirk, more troubled than before, didn't speak, either, as he got to his feet and left Sickbay.

Behind him, Mitchell increased the speed of the viewer's turning pages. He read fast—a man locking facts into his mind with an incredible rapidity.

An image of the turning pages was showing on Spock's library computer screen. When Kirk joined him, they were turning so quickly that their movement was blurred. Spock said, "He's reading faster with every passing second. Is that Gary Mitchell? The slowpoke reader we used to know?"

Kirk took three paces away from the screen and returned. "Put a twenty-four hour watch on Sickbay. The fullest possible range of examinations and tests."

The results gave joy to the heart of Piper. "Perfect—perfect," he murmured as he completed his final checkup. "Such perfect health is rare." He tapped the body function panel as though it were hard to credit the veracity of its readings.

"Great in all departments, right?" said Mitchell. Bored, he spoke to Elizabeth. "Too bad psychiatry isn't an exact science, eh, Doctor? Be nice to have a dial that showed the level of a patient's sanity."

"I am aware that you don't particularly like me, Commander," she said. "But since I'm assigned here, can we make the best of it?"

"I've got nothing against you, Doctor."

"Or against the 'walking refrigerator'?"

He was openly startled. "Sorry about that." All his charm went into the three words.

"Women professionals do tend to overcompensate," she said. "Now let's talk about you. How do you feel? Tell me everything."

"Everything about what? Everyone seems worried because I don't have a fever or something." He pointed to the body function panel. "Now old Piper's gone, maybe I can make you happy by changing those readings…"

The panel's normal levels altered into abnormal ones. Elizabeth stared at them and back at Mitchell. Slightly shaken himself, he said, "Now the normal readings again…"

The levels dropped back to normal.

"How did you do that?" Elizabeth demanded.

"I'm not sure. I—just thought of making it happen. Then it happened." He eyed the panel. "It's not the instruments. It's me. Something I do inside. Hey, watch this…"

All the panel's levels plummeted to zero.

Elizabeth grabbed his hand. "Stop it!" she cried. "Stop it now!"

The gauge needles quivered. Rising swiftly up from the "death" indication, they came to rest at normal.

Mitchell stared at them, too. He had paled; and Elizabeth, appalled, said, "For twenty-two seconds you were *dead!* No life function at all!"

Mitchell suddenly realized she was holding his hand. Reddening, she tried to pull hers away but he held it fast. "Hang on a minute, baby. I'm scared. There've been other things, too. Like going halfway through the ship's library in hardly a day. What's happened to me?"

"Do you remember everything you read that quickly?"

He nodded. She took a tape from his bedside table. "On any tape? How about this one? Do you remember page 387?"

"Sure," he said. "It's *The Nightingale Woman* written by Tarbolde on a Canopus planet back in 1996. It begins, 'My love has wings, Slender, feathered things, With grace in upswept curve and tapered tip—' " He stopped, amused. "Funny you should pick that one."

"Why?"

"It's one of the most passionate love poems of the last couple of centuries."

She pulled her hand from his. He watched her do it, smiling. "How do *you* feel?" he asked.

"What? Oh, you mean that electrical blast! It just knocked me down. That's all."

"You're very sure?"

She wasn't sure of anything in the presence of this man with the silver eyes so bright upon her. But somehow, she suspected that she'd given herself away. She was glad when the knock came at the door. It was Kelso. "I was on my coffee break," he told them, "and thought I'd just check up on Gary here."

"It's OK, Lee," Mitchell said. "Come on in."

It was Kelso's first full view of the changed eyes. They disconcerted him. Mitchell laughed. "Don't let my gorgeous orbs throw you, chum. The lady doctor here likes them, don't you, beautiful Doctor?"

Surprised, Kelso said, "Oh. Yeah. Sure."

"How goes the repair work?"

"The main engines are gone." Kelso's face grew somber. "And they'll stay gone, too, unless we can find some way of reenergizing them."

Mitchell frowned. "You'd better check on the starboard impulse packs. The points have decayed to lead." At Kelso's look of amazement, he said, "I'm not joking, pal. So wipe the shock off your face. You activate those packs—and you'll blow up the whole impulse deck!"

The hardness in his voice got through to Kelso. "Sure," he said hastily. "I'll get on to them right away. I—I just wanted to say I'm glad you're all right."

Mitchell glared angrily after him. "The fool! He's seen those rotten points a hundred times but is too dumb to notice their condition!"

"How did *you* know about them?" Elizabeth asked.

The arrogance was suddenly gone. "I don't know. Maybe the image of what he saw was still in his mind and I—I could see it in his mind." The silver eyes were looking up at her out of a bewildered, very frightened face.

In the Briefing Room, Kelso was pointing to the fused tip in a starboard impulse pack. "It made no sense at all that he'd know about this," he said to Kirk. "But naturally I took a look at the packs anyway. And he's right! This point's burned out just as he described it!"

Each in turn, the Science Department heads examined the piece of metal on the Briefing Room table. Elizabeth opened the door. "Sorry I'm late, Captain. I became so interested in observing Gary —Commander Mitchell—that I…"

Spock said, "The subject under discussion is not Commander Mitchell, Doctor. We are concerned with what he is mutating into."

Her face tightened with anger. "I know Vulcans lack human feeling, but to talk like that about a man you've worked next to for

years…”

“That’s enough, Doctor!” Kirk said.

“No, it isn’t!” she cried. “I understand you least of all! Gary’s told me you’ve been friends ever since he joined the service! You even asked him to join your first command!”

Kirk kept his voice level. “It is my duty, Doctor, to note the reports, observations, even speculations on any subject which affects the safety of this ship.” He nodded toward Spock. “And it is my Science Officer’s duty to see that I’m provided with them. Go ahead, Mr Spock.”

Spock addressed Elizabeth. “Has he shown any evidence of unusual powers to you?”

She didn’t mention the tricks he’d played with the body function panel. Instead, she chose to say, “He can control certain autonomic reflexes. He reads very fast; and retains more than most of us consider usual.”

Kirk spoke sharply. “Repeat what you just told us, Mr Scott.”

“About an hour ago,” Scott said, “the bridge controls started going crazy. Levers shifted all by themselves. Buttons were pressed without fingers to press them. Instrument readings wavered from safety points to danger ones.”

“And on my monitor screen,” Spock said, “I saw the Commander smile each time it happened. He treated the confusion he caused as though this ship and its crew were toys created for his amusement.”

“Is that correct, Dr Dehner?” Kirk queried. “Does he show abilities of that magnitude?”

“I’ve seen some such indications,” she said.

Piper spoke up. “And you didn’t think that worth the concern of the Captain?”

“No one’s been hurt!” she protested. “Don’t any of you understand? A mutated superior man could be a wonderful asset to the race—the forerunner of a new and better kind of human being!”

Kirk, looking at her exalted face, thought, Idealism gone rampant again! My God! He turned with relief to Sulu.

“If you want the mathematics on this, sir,” Sulu said, “the Commander’s ability is increasing geometrically. It’s like owning a penny that doubles every day. In a month you’d be a millionaire.”

Spock said, “In less time than that, Mitchell will attain powers we can neither understand nor cope with. What happens when

we're not only useless to him—but actual annoyances?"

Elizabeth, about to speak, decided for silence. Kirk glanced around the table. "There'll be no discussion of this with the crew. Thank you. That's all."

The room emptied of everyone but Spock. Kirk turned to see his Science Officer inspecting him, creases of worry in his forehead. He spoke with careful deliberateness. "We will never reach an Earth base with Mitchell aboard, sir. You heard the mathematics of it. In a month he'll have as much in common with us as we'd have with a ship full of white mice."

His own anxiety oppressing him, Kirk snapped, "I need recommendations, Mr Spock—not vague warnings."

"Recommendation number one. The planet, Delta Vega, is only a few light days away from here. It has a lithium cracking station. If we could adapt some of its power packs to our engines…"

"And if we can't, we'll be trapped in orbit there. We haven't the power to blast back out of it."

"It's the only possible way to get Mitchell off this ship, sir."

"If you mean strand him there, I won't do it. The station is fully automated. There's not a soul on the whole planet. Even ore ships call there only once every twenty years."

"Then you have only one other choice," Spock said. "Kill Mitchell while you can."

"Get out of here!" Kirk yelled.

Imperturbable, Spock repeated, "That's your only other choice. Assuming you take it while you still have time."

Kirk slammed his fist on the table. "Will you try for one moment to *feel?* We're talking about Gary Mitchell!"

"The Captain of the *Valiant* probably felt as you do, sir. But he waited too long to make his decision. I think we have both guessed that."

Kirk groped for a chair. Spock turned one around for him. He sank down in it, his face in his hands. After a moment, he removed them. Nodding to Spock, he said, "Set course for Delta Vega."

Mitchell's powers were indeed expanding. And he'd begun to exult in exerting them. Lying in his Sickbay bed, he suddenly decided to snap his fingers. The lights flicked off. He waved a hand—and the lights blazed back. He sat up on the bed's edge, eyeing other

portions of his room. He pointed a finger at a table. It soared into the air, teetered insanely on one leg and dropped quietly back into place.

"I am thirsty!" he abruptly announced to nobody.

Across the room, a metal cup on the water dispenser slid under the spigot. Water flowed from it. The filled cup lifted, and floating through the air, settled into Mitchell's outstretched hand. He was sipping from it when Kirk, with Spock and Elizabeth, came in.

"I feel great," Mitchell told them. "So don't bother to inquire into my state of health. Sometimes I think there's nothing I can't do. And some people believe that makes a monster of me, don't they?"

"Are you reading all our thoughts, Gary?" Kirk asked.

"Just in flashes so far—mostly strong thoughts like fear. For instance, you, Jim. You're worried about the safety of this ship."

"What would you do in my place?"

"Just what Mr Spock is thinking—kill me while you can." Lifting his hand, he pointed a finger at Kirk. A bolt of radiance shot from it—and stunned, Kirk toppled over. Spock leaped at Mitchell—but before he could touch him, he, too, had crashed to the floor.

Elizabeth seized Mitchell's arm. "Stop it, Gary!"

He looked down at Kirk who was struggling back to his feet. "Sure, I know a lot," he said. "I know you're orbiting Delta Vega, Jim. I can't let you maroon me there. I may not want to leave the ship, not yet. I may want another place. I'm not sure what kind of world I can use."

"Use?" Elizabeth said, shocked by the word's implications.

"Yes, beautiful Doctor. I don't get it all yet, but if I keep on growing, I'll be able to do things a god can do."

Spock sprang up. He struck Mitchell with a force that knocked him from the bed. He started to rise and Kirk landed a hard, fast blow on his jaw. His legs gave way. Groggy, he sprawled, supporting himself by his hands and knees. Breathing heavily, Kirk whirled to Elizabeth. "I want him unconscious for a while."

She took a hypogun from her medical case. Gas hissed as she touched Mitchell's shoulder with it. He subsided, spread-eagled, at their feet.

But another shot was required. This time Piper administered it in the Transporter Room where its technicians were preparing the beam-down to the surface of Delta Vega. But the torpor induced by the second shot lasted for less time than the unconsciousness

caused by the first one. Mitchell came out of it to begin to struggle so fiercely that he pulled himself free of the combined hold of Kirk and Spock. "Fools!" he said thickly. "Soon I will squash you all like crawling insects!"

Piper moved quickly in for a third shot. Mitchell slumped again. Dragging at him, Kirk and Spock rushed him over to the Transporter platform. The other members of the landing party hastened to their positions on it. Mitchell was swaying back onto his feet when Kirk shouted, "*Energize!*"

They materialized before the lithium cracking plant.

From what could be seen of Delta Vega's surface, it was a genuinely alien planet. Its soil was dust of a muddy blue color, and the vegetation that sprouted from it was brassy, scaled and knobbed like crocodile skin. Black boulders, their fissures filled with the blue dust, abounded—the only familiar aspect of the landscape. In the distance, a mountain of the black rock shouldered up against the horizon. But Kirk's concerns were other than the weird phenomena of the uninhabited planet. The hypos had finally got to Mitchell. Spock and Communications Officer Alden were supporting him into the building's entrance.

"Can we make it, Lee?" Kirk asked Kelso.

"If we can bypass the fuel bins without blowing ourselves up, we can make it, Captain." Kelso was gazing up at the installation. It was enormous, stretching its huge towers, metallic vats, its strangely coiling ells of complex instrumentation in all directions. Elizabeth stooped to touch a scaly flowerlike growth. It was burning hot.

"And not a soul on this planet but us?" she said.

Kirk answered her briefly. "Just us, Doctor. Lee, let's find the control room of this place."

They couldn't miss it. Doorless, it faced them in the building's central hall. Except for its contour, its size, the steady drone of its automated mechanisms, it bore some resemblance to the *Enterprise* bridge. Its walls were ranked by the same type of instrument panels, the same arrangements of meters, switches and dials. Kelso and Communications Officer Alden went at once to work selecting panels for later beamup to the *Enterprise* Engineering section. A detail of other crewmen busied themselves with the thick electronic cables that would be needed to interlink the panels left to maintain the cracking plant's operation.

Kirk watched thoughtfully. "Those fuel bins, Lee. They could be detonated from here. A destruct switch?"

Kelso looked up, surprised. "I guess a destruct switch could be wired into this panel, sir."

"Do it," Kirk said.

Kelso stared at him. Then he nodded—and Spock spoke from the doorless entrance. "Mitchell's regained full consciousness, Captain. Perhaps you'd better come."

He had been confined in a maximum security room, one made escape proof not by bars and bolts but by the invisible fence of a force field. He was pacing the room like a caged tiger. Outside, Piper, Elizabeth beside him, held his hypogun at the ready. Near them, an *Enterprise* security guard, phaser in hand, kept his eyes on the furious tiger.

"I want only one medical officer here at any one time," Kirk said. "The other will monitor him on the dispensary screen."

"I'd like my turn now," Elizabeth said. "I want to try and talk to him "

Piper nodded, handing her the hypogun. As he left, Kirk, pressing a button, tested the force field. It crackled sharply. Mitchell stopped pacing. Eyeing Kirk across the barrier, he said, "My friend, James Kirk. Remember the rodent things on Dimorus, the poisoned darts they threw? I took one meant for you…"

"And almost died. I remember," Kirk said.

"Then why be afraid of me now, Jim?"

"Gary, you have called us insects to be squashed if we got in your way."

"I was drugged then!"

"And before that, you said you'd kill a mutant like yourself were you in my place."

"Kill me then! Spock is right! And you're a fool not to do it!"

Elizabeth cried, "Gary, you don't mean that!"

He spoke directly to her. "In time, beautiful Doctor, you will understand, in time. Humans cannot survive if a race of true Espers like me is born. That's what Spock knows—and what that fool there," he nodded toward Kirk, "is too sentimental to know." He moved toward the force field sealing off his security room. As he neared it, there was a screech of high voltage. A spray of sparks flew up, scattered and died.

Spock and the guard had drawn their phasers. But Mitchell continued to push against the force field. For a moment his whole body glowed red. But through the brightness Kirk saw that the old human blueness of his eyes had replaced the silver. Then the force

field flung him away. He staggered backward and fell on the room's bunk. He sank down on it, his face in his hands, groaning.

Kirk said, "His eyes returned to normal."

"Fighting the force field drained his strength." Spock studied the swaying figure on the bunk. "He could be handled now, Captain."

"Handled," Mitchell said. He looked up. His eyes were shining with so bright a silver that the room seemed lit with silver. "I grow stronger with every passing second. I thought you knew that, Spock."

Kirk snapped his communicator open. "Put full energy on this force field, Lieutenant Kelso."

There was a louder hum as power poured into the force field. A visible radiance began to gather around it. Mitchell rose from the bunk. He rose from it to smile at Kirk from the other side of his barricade.

But if he remained Kirk's rankling thorn of anxiety, there was good news from the *Enterprise*. In its Engine Room a charred control panel had been successfully replaced by one beamed up from the cracking station. More new panels were required. So Kelso was still busy with the heavy cables he was using for the connecting link among the station's remaining panels.

Over his communicator, Scott said, "It fits like a glove, Captain. Did Mr Spock get that phaser rifle we beamed down?"

At Kirk's surprised look, Spock moved the heavy weapon from the wall he'd laid it against. Kirk shook his head in a wordless sadness before he answered Scott. "Affirmative, Scotty. Landing party out."

"Mitchell tried to break through the force field again," Spock said tonelessly. "And his eyes changed faster. Nor did he show any signs of weakness this time."

"Dr Dehner feels he isn't that dangerous," Kirk said. "What makes you right and a trained psychiatrist wrong?"

"Because she *feels*," Spock said. "Her feelings for Mitchell weaken the accuracy of her judgment. Mine tell me we'll be lucky if we can repair the ship and get away from him before he becomes very dangerous indeed."

"Captain!" Kelso called. Wearily Kirk crossed over to him. He looked at the sheathed switch Kelso had attached to a panel. It

had been painted red. "Direct to the power bins," Kelso said. "From here a man could blow up the whole valley, Captain."

"Lee," Kirk said. "Lee, if Mitchell gets out—at your discretion, positioned here, you'll be the last chance. Lee, if he gets out—I want you to hit that switch."

The full meaning of Kirk's words struck Kelso dumb. If he hit the red switch, he'd go where the valley went. He looked at the switch and back into Kirk's eyes. After a moment, he managed a very sober, "Yes, sir."

In other circumstances, regeneration of the *Enterprise* engines would have been cause for rejoicing. The ship was ready for takeoff. The working detail of crewmen had been transported back up to it. But Mitchell's condition had worsened.

Now his skin tones had altered. What had once been ruddy flesh had a silvery cast, suggesting solid metal. He stood, arms folded across his chest, looking at them across the force field. If he noticed Spock's phaser rifle, he gave no sign of it.

"He's been like this for hours," Elizabeth said.

A silver man. "Have Dr Piper meet us in the control room with Kelso," Kirk said. "We'll all beam up to the ship together."

"That's risky, sir," Spock said. "If we take our eyes off him…"

"Kelso will be on the destruct switch until the last minute." Kirk gestured to the silent figure behind the force field. "I think he knows that." Elizabeth said, "I'm staying with him." Kirk spoke flatly. "You'll leave with the ship, Doctor."

"I can't," she said. "I'm sorry." Kirk's communicator beeped. "Kirk here," he said. "The station seems to be running fine, sir," Kelso said. "Even without its quota of panels. The cables have done the job. Fission chamber three checks."

Behind him one of the cables stirred. It began to crawl toward him, snakelike. Slithering, silent, it lifted from the floor, twisting itself into loops. Abruptly, but still silently, a loop rose high into the air—and dropped over Kelso's head. A noose, flexible, inexorable, it tightened around his neck. Helplessly, Kelso tore at it, choking. Then he fell to the floor.

Mitchell smiled into Kirk's eyes. There was something ghastly in the movement of his silver lips. But Elizabeth saw only the smile.

"You see?" she cried to Kirk. "*He's not evil!*"

"You will leave with the ship, Doctor," Kirk repeated.

Mitchell spoke. "You should have killed me when you could, James. Compassion and command are an idiot's mixture."

Kirk grabbed Spock's phaser rifle. Mitchell's hand made a gesture that included them both. Flame blazed from it. As they collapsed, Mitchell walked to the force field. He brushed it as one brushes aside a flimsy curtain. A single spark flared briefly. He passed through the portal to stand face to face with Elizabeth. Taking her hand, he led her back into his room and over to a wall mirror. "Look at yourself, beautiful Doctor," he said.

She screamed. Then she flung her hands over her face to shut out the sight of her silver eyes.

Kirk wavered slowly back into consciousness. Pale, drained-looking, Piper was stooping over him. "Whatever it was, Captain, it affected me, too. Swallow this capsule." He paused. "Kelso's dead. Strangled. At least Spock *is* still alive."

"Dr Dehner?" Kirk whispered.

"She's gone with Mitchell. That capsule will restore your strength in a minute or so. I must insert one in Spock's mouth. He's still unconscious and…"

"What direction did they take?" Kirk asked.

"Toward the rock mountain."

Kirk struggled to his knees. He reached for the phaser rifle he had dropped. As he checked it, he said, "As soon as Mr Spock recovers, you will both immediately transport up to the *Enterprise*."

Piper looked up from his work of massaging the capsule down Spock's throat. "Captain, you're not—" he began.

"Where," Kirk continued inflexibly, "if you have not received a signal from me in twelve hours, you will proceed at maximum warp to the nearest Earth base. You will inform it that this entire planet is to be subjected to a lethal concentration of neutron radiation."

The capsule was working. He found he was able to stand. "No protest on this, Doctor Piper! It's an order!"

He slung the rifle over his shoulder and walked out of the cracking station.

The approach to the rock mountain's craggy escarpments made harsh going for Mitchell and Elizabeth. The sharp black stones and slithery blue sand which composed the terrain of Delta Vega had not been created for pleasant afternoon strolls. As a sudden

breeze blew sand into her face, Elizabeth panted, "It—it would take a miracle to survive here."

"Sit down," Mitchell said. "I'll make one." He made a gesture. The blue sand around them darkened into the rich brown of loam. It shifted to give way to an upspring of bubbling water. The scaly, brass-colored vegetation turned green. From a patch of it, the leafy trunk of a peach tree rose up. Fruit hung from its boughs. Mitchell bent to drink from the spring.

When she had quenched her thirst, he said, "You'll share this power, too. As you develop, you'll feel like me, able to make a world into anything you want it to be. Soon we will fully control our bodies. We'll never grow old. You're woman enough now to like that. Always young, as beautiful as you desire to be…"

He suddenly stiffened.

"What's wrong?" she asked anxiously.

"A visitor," he said. "A very foolish visitor."

"Who is it?"

"You'll enjoy playing God, Elizabeth."

A splinter of unnamable fear jabbed her. He laughed at the look on her face. "Blasphemy scares you?" He flung his arms wide, the silver hands outspread. "Let there be food! Give me Kaferian apples, world, my world!"

A squat, odd shaped tree appeared, heavy with huge red fruit. Mitchell, detaching an apple from it, bit into it, its rich yellow juice running down his silver chin. "Whenever we'd stop at that planet, I'd stock up on these," he said. "What is *your* wish? Just speak it."

Her answer came in the form of a slow, thoughtful question. "How much have I changed, Gary?"

But he wasn't listening. He had turned to concentrate his gaze on the still unseen figure of Kirk clambering over boulders, the heavy weight of the phaser rifle on his shoulder.

Mitchell spoke. "Can you hear me, James? You can't see me, I know. So let me comfort you. You're on the right path. You'll see me soon. Soon enough."

Kirk stopped. He had heard the words. How, he didn't know. He started to unlimber the rifle when he realized that Mitchell wasn't there. He resumed climbing.

"It's Captain Kirk," Elizabeth said as though speaking to herself. "In my mind I can see him."

"Go and meet him," Mitchell said. "Talk to him. Now that you're changing, you've got to discover how unimportant they are."

Hesitating, she stepped forward. Kirk sensed the presence on the shallow cliff above him, grabbed his rifle—and recognized the girl. Climbing up to her, he saw the hard silver of her eyes for the first time.

"Yes," she said. "It just took a little longer for it to happen to me."

Kirk lowered the rifle. "You've got to help me stop it, Dr Dehner. Before it goes too far with you, too."

"I've already gone far enough to—to realize what he's doing is right. It's right for us."

"And for humans?" Kirk said. "You're still partly human—or you wouldn't be with him."

She looked away from him. Without certainty, she said, "Earth is—really unimportant. Before long, we'll be where it would take millions of years of learning for humans to reach."

"How will *he* learn if he skips over those millions of years?" Kirk said. "You don't know. You can't know. *He won't have lived through them!*"

"Please" she said. "Go back while you can!"

"You heard him joke about compassion. Above all a god needs compassion, Elizabeth."

"Go back!" she shouted.

"You were a psychiatrist," Kirk said. "You know the savage we all keep buried—the primitive self we dare not expose. But he'll dare to expose his! In God's name, Doctor, make your prognosis!"

Her face was tortured. Then she whispered, "He's coming!"

But he was already here. He ignored Kirk to speak to the girl. "I'm disappointed in you, Elizabeth. You still have doubts."

Whipping up his rifle, Kirk fired it at him. A fiery beam lanced out of it and struck him full in the chest. Its redness faded. Mitchell raised a finger. The rifle tore from Kirk's grasp to clatter on the stones beside him.

Time passed. Then Mitchell broke the silence. "I have been meditating," he said. "I have been reflecting upon the death of an old friend. His death and his honorable burial."

Kirk turned. Behind him, brown earth was scooping itself out into the neat shape of a grave. Elizabeth stared at Mitchell in unbelief. Trembling, she looked back at the grave. At its head stood a tidy, white military cross bearing the inscription "James R. Kirk. C1277.1 to 1313.7."

A grinding sound came from overhead. Kirk looked up. A huge, rectangular rock slab was detaching itself from the cliff wall. It wobbled for a moment. Then it teetered into position directly above the grave.

Elizabeth screamed. "No, Gary, no!"

"You still like what you're seeing?" Kirk asked her.

"Time to pray, Captain," Mitchell said.

"To you?" Kirk said. "Not to both of you?"

The silver finger pointed at him. He was struck to his knees by the flash that darted from it. He remained on his knees, his eyes on the girl. "This is a jealous god, Elizabeth. In the end there will be one of you."

"Your last chance, Kirk!"

Elizabeth tensed. Sparks suddenly crackled between her and Mitchell. He reeled, recovered—and extended a silver hand toward her. A storm of sparks broke from it. She staggered, moaning with pain. But the energy drain had told on Mitchell. For a single second his eyes went blue. Then they were impervious silver once more. And once more the silver hand was extended toward the girl. A fiery mantle of sparks engulfed her. She crumpled. "Hurry," she whispered to Kirk. "There's—so little time."

The second outlay of energy had been expensive. Realizing his weakness, Mitchell turned to run. Kirk hurled himself forward and made a grab for his legs. A booted foot caught him in the chest. Then Mitchell seized a jagged rock. Kirk dodged the blow and closed with him.

"Gary, listen! For this moment you are human again…"

"It's gone now!" On a new surge of power, Mitchell smashed Kirk down with a silver fist.

He hit the ground hard, almost falling into the open grave. Then Mitchell was on him. In dizzy changes his face turned from silver to flesh. The silver won. Wrestling with him, Kirk could feel his whole body transforming itself into metal. He wrenched himself free, and had reached the rifle when Mitchell ripped an edged section of rock from the outcropping above them. It brushed his shoulder at the same moment he fired the rifle.

The beam missed Mitchell. But it struck the soft blue sand beneath the overhanging slab of rock that was to be his tombstone. It toppled and fell toward the grave.

"Gary!" Kirk shouted. "Look out!"

It was too late. Stumbling backward, Mitchell tripped. The rock slab hit him, tumbling him into the grave. A cloud of blue dust rose. When it settled, it had filled the letters etched into the broken white military cross.

Kirk kneed himself over to Elizabeth. The silver had gone from her eyes. "It's—all over, isn't it?" The voice was so weak that he had to stoop to hear it. Her head lolled over Kirk's arm. She was dead.

He got to his feet, a lonely stranger on a strange planet in a strange galaxy. But his communicator was familiar.

He spoke into it, his voice very tired. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Come in, *Enterprise*."

It was almost as strange to be back in his command chair. He'd been a far way. The magnetic space storm—Delta Vega—Mitchell's death—Kelso's—were they all events that had occurred in a dream? The new control panels around him were blinking as steadily as though they were the old ones. It was good to see Spock just standing there beside him.

"Ready to leave orbit, sir," Scott called from Kelso's old position.

"Engage," Kirk said. He switched on his Captain's log. "Add to official casualties, Dr Elizabeth Dehner. Be it noted that she gave her life in performance of her duty. And Lieutenant Commander Gary Mitchell. The same notation."

He looked at Spock. "After all, he didn't ask for what happened to him. I want his service record to end that way."

Spock's Mephisto features were tranquil. "I felt for him, too, sir, strange to say."

Kirk eyed him speculatively. "Watch yourself, Mr Spock," he said. "Your compassion is showing."

THE CORBOMITE MANEUVER

(Jerry Sohl)

Spock was making a map of the galaxy's planetary systems, a long and tedious job. However, six of the nine squares of his screen were finally lighted on photographic charts of the star fields already explored by the *Enterprise*. His camera clicked again, and the seventh square broke into lighted life, picturing the quadrant of starry space through which the Starship was moving. Observant, Bailey, the newly appointed navigator, young, unseasoned, a novice in Starfleet service, eyed the square with clumsily concealed impatience.

"Three days of this, Mr Spock. Other ships must have made star maps of some of this."

Spock spoke gently. "Negative, Lieutenant. We're the first to reach this far. We—"

He was interrupted by the siren shriek of the alarm; and Bailey, removing his eyes from Spock's screen, stared at the red light flashing on his own console. Leaning past him, Sulu called, "Sir! Contact with an object. It's moving toward us."

Spock rose, and, striding swiftly to the empty command chair, said, "Deflectors! Full intensity."

Half out of his chair, Bailey shouted, "And it's on *collision* course with us!"

"Evasive maneuvers, Mr Sulu," Spock said mildly.

Working levers, Sulu took a reading of the results. "Object's changing direction with us, sir. Keeps on coming at us."

Uhura's rich contralto spoke. "Getting no signal from it, sir."

"And it's still on collision course with us!"

The excitement in Bailey's voice contrasted only too vividly with the controlled, efficient composure of those of his bridge mates. Instead of registering the difference—and using it for improved self-discipline—he raised his voice to a near scream. "*And our deflectors aren't stopping it!*"

Spock said, "Sound general alarm. All hands prepare—"

Sulu broke in. “It’s slowing down, sir.”

The calm Vulcan voice said, “Countermand general alarm. All engines full stop.”

“Visual contact!”

It was Bailey’s cry undertoned by a triumph mingled with a now open arrogance.

As the *Enterprise* slowed to a stop, star movement halted with it. And on the bridge screen appeared a pinpoint of light that wasn’t a star—an image which so swiftly expanded that the bridge’s watchful eyes could identify it as a crystal-like cube, rotating, luminescent and resuming its speed toward them. Then suddenly, it too stopped, hanging in space as it slowly revolved on its unseen axis, an eerie montage of unearthly colours changing, merging and dividing as the thing turned its faces toward them.

Spock looked away from it. “Ahead slow. Steer a course around it, Mr Sulu.”

But the moment they began to move, the cube moved with them.

“It’s blocking the way!” Bailey roared. “Deliberately blocking it!”

Spock turned tranquil eyes on him.

“Quite unnecessary to raise your voice, Mr Bailey. Unlike us, the object appears to lack hearing.” Then addressing Sulu, he added, “Engines full stop. Sound the alert.”

The stridency of the alarm shrilled again. Smacking buttons, Sulu said, “Bridge to all decks. Condition alert. Captain Kirk to the bridge!”

Kirk’s well-muscled body was in shorts. McCoy had him lying on his back, arms pulling, legs pushing at an exercise device suspended from Sickbay’s ceiling—a posture that hid the red light flashing over the door. McCoy noticed it; but absorbed in panel reports of Kirk’s body functions, he decided not to mention it. It was his nightmare—persuading Kirk to submit to a medical exam. Yet monitoring the health of the elusive flea who was Captain of the *Enterprise* was his prime professional responsibility. Now was his rare, rare chance. And he didn’t intend to lose it to the vagaries of electric lights—red, blue, yellow or any other colour of the spectrum.

Completing his readings, he switched off the exercise machine and said, “Winded, Jim?”

Kirk slipped off the table. "If I were, you're the last person I'd tell—" and at the instant of speaking, registered the on-off flashing of the red light over the door. Racing to a panel, he switched it on and, pushing a knob, spoke into the intercom.

"Kirk here. What goes on?"

He learned.

The small screen over the intercom showed Spock's face, its moving lips. "Take a look at this, Captain."

Spock dissolved into a view of the slowly rotating cube. "Whatever it is," Spock's voice offered, "it's blocking our way. When we move, it moves too, sir."

Snapping the screen dark, Kirk grabbed up a sweatshirt, a towel; and shouldering head first into the sweatshirt, emerged from it to whirl on McCoy.

"You could see that light from where you were! Why didn't you say so?"

"At least I finished a physical on you, didn't I? What am I, a doctor…"

But Kirk was gone.

Gathering up his instruments, McCoy completed his sentence to his own infinite reassurance and satisfaction. "? or a trolley car conductor? If I jumped every time a light blinked around here, I'd end up in a straightjacket."

Outside, Kirk, accelerating his pace, passed racing crewmen as Sulu's voice came over the loudspeaker.

"All decks alert. All hands to general quarters."

Kirk, tightening the towel around his neck, headed for the turbo-car elevator at the end of the corridor. The doors whooshed closed behind him and he said, "Bridge."

Relays whirred like crickets at the verbal instruction; and on the control panel, lights blinked as the car began its vertical ascent, the elevator hum growing with its increasing speed. But Kirk, chafing at the delay, pushed a button on the intercom panel.

"Kirk to bridge."

"Spock here, sir."

"Any changes?"

"Negative. Whatever it is, it seems to just want to hold us here."

"I'll stop to change, then." And shutting off the intercom, spoke to the turbo-car. "Captain's quarters."

Smoothly, the car braked; and when it resumed movement just as smoothly, altered its direction from vertical to horizontal.

In the bridge, Spock was standing beside Bailey, whose eyes seemed hypnotized by the indefinably sinister cube shown on the screen. Jerking the young navigator out of his trance, he said, "All decks have reported, Mr Bailey."

Flushing, Bailey started.

"Yes, sir," he said, and rousing, turned off the still flashing red light on his console.

Spock, at his Vulcan coolest, said, "When the Captain arrives, he'll expect a report on—"

"—on the cube's range and position. I'll have them by then, sir."

As Spock gravely nodded, Bailey added, "Raising my voice back here, sir, didn't mean I was scared or couldn't do my job. It just means that I happen to have a human thing called an adrenalin gland."

Spock paused, startled by the aggression of this backhanded reference to his alien origin. Then yet more solemn-faced, he nodded again at Bailey.

"Sounds most inconvenient," he said. "Have you ever thought of having it removed?"

He left Bailey for the command chair; and the red-faced navigator, aware of a poorly muffled guffaw from Sulu's station beside him, flushed still redder.

"Very funny," he sneered.

The choking Sulu recovered himself long enough to say breathlessly, "Kid… you try to cross brains with Spock—and he'll… cut you into pieces too small to find."

"If I were the Captain—"

"He's even rougher. But I'm warning you, brother. It comes as more of a shock because he's such a hell of a leader."

The very rough Captain had opened his quarters door to see his yeoman laying out one of his uniforms. Unwinding the towel from his neck, he threw it at a chair and said, "Thank you, Yeoman."

Apparently unruffled by his tone, Janice Rand said, "Yes, sir," and opening the door, closed it behind her as Kirk, yanking off his sweatshirt, shoved a switch on a panel under a small screen. "Captain to bridge."

The screen lighted to the sight of his Science Officer's face who said, "Spock here, sir."

"Any signs of life?"

"Negative, sir."

"Have you tried all hailing frequencies?"

"Affirmative. No answer from the cube."

Kirk pulled his uniform shirt into unwrinkled, precise position. "Have the department heads meet me on the bridge."

"Already standing by, Captain."

The cube was still revolving on its hypothetical axis, its alternating, unnameable colours reflected from the screen onto the human faces nearest it, making them unfamiliar. Tossing it a look, Kirk said, "Navigation?"

"Distance to us," Bailey said, "fifteen hundred meters, position constant."

"Helm?"

"Sir, each of its edges measures one hundred seven meters. Mass, a little under eleven thousand tons."

"Communications?"

"Hailing frequencies still open, sir," Uhura said. "No message."

"Mr Spock?"

"Sensor shows it is solid, sir; but its principal substances are unknown to us."

"Engineering?"

"Motive power…" Scott shrugged. "A solid. Beats me what makes it go, sir."

Kirk smiled at him. "I'll buy speculation, Scotty."

"And I'd sell if I had any. How a solid cube can sense us coming, block us, move when we move… ah dinna ken, sir, as my people used to say. That's my report."

Kirk looked at McCoy. "Life Sciences?"

"Same report, Jim. No chance of life existing inside a solid cube; but there must be some kind of external intelligence somewhere directing it."

"Thank you, Bones."

Bailey exploded.

"We going to just let it hold us here, sir? We've got phaser weapons. I vote we blast it."

Kirk turned to look at him. When he spoke, his voice was dry as withered leaves. "I'll keep that in mind, Mr Bailey, when this becomes a democracy."

He left his chair to move to the elevator, followed by other bridge people. Bailey, except for Sulu, was left standing alone beside his console.

"See what I mean?" Sulu said. "Sit down."

The enigmatic cube had held the Starship at bay for eighteen hours. Its origin, like its purpose, was still unknown to members of the exhausted crew, the eyes of Kirk, his officers and department heads bloodshot from study of star maps that consistently refused to show any habitable planet close enough to account for the mysterious object. In the Briefing Room, shoving aside the litter of graphs and computations on the table, he threw down his stylus and leaned back in his chair for a long stretch. Around him, others stifled yawns.

"Anything further, gentlemen?" Kirk said.

Spock spoke. "I believe it adds up to one of two possibilities. First, a space buoy of some kind—'flypaper,' sir."

The word so puzzled the others that it roused them. But Kirk, nodding at Spock, said, "And you don't recommend sticking around."

"Negative, Captain. It would make us look too weak."

Uhura voiced the general perplexity. "I thought I'd learned English by now."

Smiling, Kirk said, "Flypaper—a Nineteenth Century device—a paper Earth used to use covered with a sticky substance to trap insects which flew into it."

Scholarly, solemn, Spock said, "More your Twentieth Century, I believe, sir."

"Undoubtedly so, Mr Spock," Kirk said.

"Somebody out there doesn't like us," Sulu said.

Kirk got to his feet, stretched again and sat down. "It's time for action, gentlemen. Mr Bailey…"

The headlong navigator swung a lever on his table panel. "Briefing Room to phaser gun crews—"

"Countermand!" Kirk snapped, hitting a switch on his own panel. But his voice was unusually gentle as he addressed the now quaking Bailey. "Do you mind if I select the kind of action to be taken by my ship, Mr Bailey?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I thought you meant—"

"Are you explaining, Mr Bailey? When I want an explanation, I shall so inform you."

The navigator wilted. Kirk went on. "Now, as I started to say, Mr Bailey, plot us a spiral course away from the cube. Mr Sulu, alert the Engine Room. We'll try pulling away from it."

Kirk rose and, at the Briefing Room door, waited until Sulu had pushed a panel button, saying, "Helmsman to Engine Room. Stand by, all decks alert. We're going to try pulling away."

In the bridge, a stricken Bailey punched in the spiral course and, without turning, said, "Course plotted and laid in, Captain."

From his chair, Kirk glanced around at his busy bridge crew. Then looking at the screened cube, said, "Engage, Mr Sulu. Quarter speed."

Engine hum deepened; and as the *Enterprise* veered in its new curving course, stars slid sideways—but the cube kept exact pace with the ship.

"Still blocking us, sir," Sulu said.

"Then let's see if it'll give way. Ahead, half speed."

"Point five-o, sir," Sulu said.

With the increased speed, the cube loomed larger on the screen, rotating faster and its colours beginning to glow. Suddenly, warning lights burst into crimson on all control panels of the bridge, the cube now whirling dizzily, its colours growing in intensity.

Spock looked up from his mounded viewer. "Radiation, sir. From the short end of the spectrum. And it's becoming stronger."

Kirk ordered the ship to a full stop. The stars came to a standstill. However, the cube, despite the *Enterprise's* stationary position, maintained its approach to the vessel, its colours flaring into violence.

"It's still coming at us!" Bailey said. "Range ninety meters, Captain."

His eyes on the screen, Kirk heard Spock say, "Radiation increasing, sir."

"Power astern, half speed, Mr Sulu."

"Half speed, sir."

The engines' hum returned as they began to move the ship backward, the maneuver, instead of discouraging the cube's pursuit, inciting it to higher speed.

"Radiation nearing tolerance level, sir," Spock reported.

Revolving into blur now, the cube's brilliant colours were flooding the bridge with their reflections, distorting faces with gaunt shadows and inhuman skin shades.

"Still coming," Bailey said. "Gaining on us."

Kirk said, "Engines astern, full speed."

"Full speed, sir."

Stars sped away as the ship accelerated rearward, though the cube merely grew in size on the screen, its fiery glow still brighter as it twisted wildly on its axis.

"Range, seventy-one meters now, sir," Bailey said.

Kirk addressed Sulu. "Helm, give us Warp power."

Over the surge of Warp power added to the engine hum, Sulu said, "Warp One, sir."

Spock's voice was toneless. "Radiation at the tolerance level, Captain."

"Warp Two, sir," Sulu said.

The deadly, spinning top still clung to them; and looking at his Captain, Sulu said, "Speed is now Warp Three, sir."

"Radiation is passing tolerance level, Captain," Spock said. "Entering lethal zone."

"Range fifty meters and still closing!"

"Phaser crews stand ready," Kirk said.

"Phaser crews report ready, sir," Bailey said.

The stars were flying past in reversed movement as the cube, a blaze of viciously vivid colours, was closing the gap between it and the ship.

"Lock phasers on target," Kirk said.

Spock moved from his station to the command chair. "Radiation still growing. We can take only a few seconds more of it, sir."

Nearest the screen, they both had to shield their eyes from their pursuer's fierce glare.

"Phasers locked on target, sir," Bailey said. "Point blank range and closing."

"Fire main phasers."

The beams, striking the cube, exploded it, swamping the bridge in a blinding geyser of light. Then the blast waves hit, rocking the ship so that officers and crewmen had to grab at consoles to avoid being hurled to the deck. Bridge lights flickered, dimmed and the *Enterprise* hung motionless, a stilled, meaningless speck against the vast reaches of star-filled space.

Kirk, considering his phasers' removal of the blockage, felt no elation. Now what? To probe on ahead was only too probably to invite attack, its source as unknown as the attacker. Had the mysterious cube been an envoy of some murderous space-psychopath? Was he then to risk his ship and his crew or turn back on his course? Restless, he joined Spock at his viewer.

"How do they describe our mission, Mr Spock? Ah, yes. 'To go where no man has gone before.' "

"So it is said, Captain." The clear, straight eyes under the cocked brows met his. "However, sensors reveal nothing. No object, no contact in any direction."

"Care to speculate on what we'll find if we go ahead?"

"Speculate?" Spock shook his head. "I prefer logic, sir. We'll encounter the intelligence which sent the cube out."

"Intelligence simply different from ours—or superior?"

"Probably both. And if you're asking the logical decision to make __"

"I'm not."

Spock eyed him. "Has it occurred to you, sir, there is a certain inefficiency in questioning me about matters on which you've already made up your mind?"

"But it gives me emotional security," Kirk told him, deadpan. He turned. "Set course ahead, Mr Bailey."

"Plotted and laid in, sir."

"Engage," Kirk said.

The engines whined up; and Sulu said, "Warp One, sir."

Now that decision for ongoing had been made, it called for some protective reinforcement. Back at his command post, Kirk looked at his bridge personnel, his face stern, uncompromising. "Navigator," he said, "Phaser crews were sluggish, and you were slow in locking them into your directional beams. Helmsman, Engineering decks could have moved faster too. Mr Spock will program a series of simulated attacks and evasion maneuvers."

Focusing cold eyes on Bailey and Sulu, he said, "Keep repeating the exercises until I am satisfied, gentlemen."

McCoy had been standing at the elevator doors, watching and listening. Now as Kirk approached them, he spoke quietly. "Your timing is lousy, Jim. The men are tired."

"You're the one who says a little suffering is good for the soul."

"I never say that!"

As they stepped into the turbo-car, a look passed between them. McCoy *had* said it, would say it again—and they both knew it. He made no retort. Kirk said, "Captain's quarters," and the car began its descent as Bailey's voice came over its speaker. "This is the bridge. Engineering and Phaser decks, prepare for simulated attack. Repeat: simulated attack."

McCoy gestured to the speaking panel. "And I'm worried about Bailey. Navigator's position is rough enough on a seasoned man—"

Kirk's interruption was short and impatient. "I think he'll cut it."

"How so sure? Because you spotted something you liked in him… something familiar like yourself fifteen years ago?"

Irritated, Kirk was about to silence McCoy when he was silenced himself by Bailey's "*On the double*, deck five! Give me a green light!"

"Suppose you could have promoted him too fast? Listen to his voice, Jim…"

Once more Bailey's voice won McCoy a reprieve. "Condition alert… battle stations…"

The alert signal was still shrilling in the elevator when its doors opened on a corridor of running crew members, but Bailey's commands followed Kirk into his cabin. "Engineering deck five, report. Phaser crews, come on, let's get on with it!"

In a chair, eyes closed, drained and fatigued, Kirk listened. Clearly Bailey was enjoying the delegation of command. A kid playing with a terrible responsibility. As to himself, was he tired of it? Maybe. Choice, he thought, was an illusion. Untried and in moral darkness, one was impelled in a direction by unconscious forces beyond one's comprehension; by idealisms that turned out to be egotisms, a drive, for instance, not toward the harmonious music of the spheres, but to the glamor of a Starship command. And you were properly punished for such self-delusion by the absolute aloneness of command's heavy obligation.

"Here, Jim."

He took the drink McCoy handed him. "What's next? More humanism? 'They're not machines, Jim'?"

"They're—"

"I've heard you say that man is superior to any machines, Bones."

"I never said that either!" McCoy snapped.

At the flash of a red light on his cabin's panel, Kirk rose. "Kirk here."

Spock said, “Exercise rating, Captain. Ninety-four percent.”

“Let’s try for a hundred, Mr Spock.”

For the unflawed. Nothing less than human perfection could satisfy a Starship Captain. “I am tired,” he thought. “I ought to be selling charter flights to Mars.” And the door opened. Janice Rand, carrying a tray covered by a white cloth, bypassed Kirk and McCoy to place it on the desk beside the Captain’s chair.

Kirk questioned her with frowning eyebrows.

Removing the cloth, she said, “It’s past time you ate something, sir.”

“What the devil? Green leaves? Am I a herbivore?”

The girl indicated McCoy. “Dietary salad, sir. Dr McCoy changed your diet card. I thought you knew.”

From the cabin’s panel, Bailey said, “This is the bridge. All decks prepare for better reaction time on second simulated attack.”

Kirk, regarding the salad with loathing, picked up a fork, picked at it as Janice, a shade too professional, unfolded his napkin.

McCoy said, “Your weight was up a couple of pounds. Remember?”

Kirk, grabbing the napkin, threw it to the desk. “Will you stop hovering over me, Yeoman?”

“I just wanted to change it if it’s not… all right, sir.”

Kirk looked into the young, earnest, feminine gray eyes. A moment passed before he said, “It’s… fine. Bring the doctor some too.”

McCoy contemplated his feet. “No, thank you. I never eat until the crew eats.”

Yeoman Rand poured some liquid into the glass on the tray.

Watching her, Kirk spread his left hand’s ringers over his forehead and right eye. Politely he said, “All right, Yeoman. Thank you.”

As she closed the door back of her, he closed his eyes. “Bones, when I find the Headquarters genius who assigned me a female yeoman—”

“She’s very attractive. You don’t trust yourself?”

He could, of course, Kirk thought, dash the glass of liquid into McCoy’s face. That would quiet him down, discouraging transfer of his own male yens to other men who didn’t feel them. But he was too tired to do a good job of it.

"I'm married," he said. "And a faithful husband. My girl is called the *Enterprise*. And the first mistake this other female, this yeoman makes—"

McCoy smiled, shaking his head. "She won't," he said.

Bailey spoke again from the cabin's panel. "Engineering decks alert. Phaser crews, let's—"

The alarm signal crushed his voice. Then as the panel's red light flashed on-off, Sulu, too controlled, said, interrupting, "*Countermand* that! All decks to battle stations! This is for real. Repeat. All decks to battle stations. *This is for real*."

The red light on the panel buzzed.

Kirk said, "Kirk here."

Spock's filtered and uninflected voice said, "Sensors are picking up something ahead of us, Captain."

"Coming," Kirk said.

In the bridge, Spock, bent over his hooded viewer, lifted his head from it long enough to report to his Captain, "Exceptionally strong contact but not visual yet."

A silent Kirk watched him stoop again to appraise his dials and controls, and, frowning, punch in new coordinates. Their results inspected, Spock said tonelessly, "Distance spectograph… metallic; similar to cube… much greater energy reading."

Turning, Kirk said, "Screen on." But all it showed was stars arranged in a design which to human eyes was also random, undesigned. Then Sulu called, "There, sir!"

Kirk saw it too—a tiny speck of light already developing size even as he looked at it, a tightness beginning to constrict his chest as he said, "Half speed. Prepare for evasive action."

Sulu responded. "Reducing speed to Warp Two, sir."

The next moment, the *Enterprise* bridge seemed to upend, shuddering, twisting like a toy in the hand of a giant imbecile child. A guard at the door fell, sliding nearly the length of the deck before he caught hold of a cabinet handle. People grabbed at anything and everything that seemed to offer stability—their chair legs, console counters, steel files.

Spock, back in his seat, said, "Tractor beam, sir. It's got us—tight."

A recovered Sulu spoke. "Engines overloading, sir."

"All engines stop," Kirk said.

"All engines stopped, sir."

Kirk, resting his head against the back of the command chair, looked at the screen again where the light speck was magnifying into a shape.

"Object decelerating, sir," Bailey said.

At his library computer, Spock was getting results from his inputs. "Size and mass of the object—" he paused, shaking his head. "This must be wrong. I'm getting a faulty reading."

Kirk, resolving his conflict between his obsession with what the screen showed and his urge to ask Spock what he'd discovered about it, said, "Phaser crews stand by."

The thing on the screen had enlarged into a mass that should have made some identification of it possible; but like the cube, the image was too alien in appearance to make any judgment of it reliable. What it absurdly seemed, to be was a rounded cluster of balls, each growing bigger as it neared. Curious and unbelieving, Kirk could see the cell-like sections pulsing with inner light.

As though to herself, Uhura whispered, "It's not true."

Spock, his eyes on the screen said, "No, I'm afraid my reading was accurate, sir."

The huge screen was rapidly becoming a formidable reporter. In the lower quadrant of its frame, the immense *Enterprise* hung motionless, and in the distance, the other ship (for it was a ship) was still small but was continuously growing. Soon it matched the size of the *Enterprise* in the opposite quadrant; but discontent with equality of mass, it increased its own, and went on increasing it until it was twice as large as the Starship, occupying the entire frame of the screen. When the alien vessel had completely dwarfed the *Enterprise*, it was so monstrous that only a part of it could be seen on the screen.

The bridge crew was stunned, struck down into awe as it contemplated the imaged Colossus. Spock alone regarded it with an interest as lively as it was intense.

Kirk spoke quietly. "Mass, Mr Sulu."

The amazed Sulu said "Shoooooosh!" Then registering Kirk's glance, added, "The reading goes off my scale, sir. It must be a mile in diameter."

Spock murmured, "Fascinating!"

"Reduce image," Kirk said.

Bailey was too dumbstruck to act, so Sulu, leaning across to his console, turned a switch. Gradually, the vastness of the screened shape diminished until the frame could hold it in its total form.

"Lieutenant Uhura, ship to ship," Kirk said.

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

Kirk reached for his speaker. "This is the United Earth Ship *Enterprise*. We convey greetings and await your reply."

They were allowed to wait. Then Bailey, who had put on earphones, suddenly straightened. He froze, staring, his face blanched, his mouth slack and open.

"What is it, Mr Bailey?"

The navigator turned his appalled face. "Message, sir… coming over my navigation beam." He swallowed, listened, clutching the earphones close to his head. Kirk looked away from him to address his Communications Officer.

"Pick it up, Lieutenant Uhura."

"Switching, sir."

The replay of the message, amplified, struck the bridge with an incoherent cataract of roar; but Kirk, joining Spock to listen, was finally able to discern words in what had been bedlam.

"? and trespassed into our star systems. This is Balok, Commander of the Flagship Fesarius of the First Federation… Your vessel, obviously the product of a primitive and savage civilization, having ignored a warning buoy of the First Federation, then destroyed it, has demonstrated that your intention is not peaceful…"

The voice, issuing from a larynx of iron, paused before adding, "*We are now considering disposition of your ship and the life aboard*."

"Ship to ship," Kirk said.

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

Kirk, whose own voice, filtered, and amplified, sounded strange, spoke composedly. "This is the Captain of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. The warning nature of your space buoy was unknown to us: our vessel was blocked by it and when we attempted to disengage—"

A squealing feedback, taking over, drowned his last sentence; and though Spock could see that his lips were still moving, only the squeal could be heard.

It stopped as Uhura, in obedience to a gesture from Kirk, cut the frequency. He stood silent beside Spock as the Vulcan's computer burst into a frenzy of red lights. Pulling at switches,

twisting dials as though he were trying to shut something off, the Science Officer said, "Captain… we are being invaded by exceptionally strong sensor probes. Everywhere… our electrical systems… our engines… even our cabins and labs."

Amplified, the harsh voice of the Fesarius commander grated again throughout the bridge. "*No further communication will be accepted. If there is the slightest hostile move, your vessel will be destroyed immediately*."

Silence fell over the bridge personnel. Long experience in the unimaginable, training and self-discipline, though well indoctrinated, failed to rescue them from the paralysis induced by Balok's threat. Kirk was the first to move, walking to his command chair, aware as he'd been a thousand times before of his crew's eyes on him, hopeful, expectant, the miracle maker.

A couple of console lights faded and went dark. Spock, working at his panel, called, "They're shutting off some of our systems, sir. Brilliant! I'd like to study, their methods."

As Kirk leaned forward in his chair, the humming of the bridge relays and servo-motors lost rhythm before going still.

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "does our recorder marker have all this on its tapes?"

"Enough to alert other ships, sir."

"Mr Bailey, dispatch recorder marker."

Bailey merely stared at Kirk. Then as though the look in them had released him from some witchcraft, he made the proper adjustments on his panel; and wetting his dry lips, said, "Recorder marker ejected, sir."

"And it's on course," Spock said, lifting his head from his viewer. "Heading back the way we—"

White light flared from the screen, washing living faces with deathly pallor. Then another shock wave struck, tilting the Starship and once more compelling the bridge people to clutch at any available support. One hand outstretched to Sulu's console, the other hiding his eyes, Bailey whispered, "Oh, my God."

It was the moment Balok chose to make his deafening announcement. "*Your record marker has been destroyed.*" Then came a second's reprieve before he added, "*You have been examined. Regretfully, your ship must be destroyed*."

Fury flamed in Kirk, a rage so violent that his knuckles whitened on his command chair's arms as he fought to pull it back to hitherto unknown deeps within himself. Vaguely, he heard Bailey give a sob.

The Fesarius commander was clearly enjoying his role of cat with mouse.

"Your ending will be painless. We make assumption you have a deity, or deities, or some such beliefs which comfort you. We therefore grant you ten Earth time periods known as minutes to make preparation. We will not alter our decision; we will not accept communication. Upon any evasive or hostile move, you will be instantly destroyed."

Kirk had won his struggle. The fury of rage had retreated to give way to a fury of thinking. Over at his station, Spock, working intently with his dials, said, "Might be interesting to see what they look like. If I can locate where that voice is coming from—"

Behind his command chair, the elevator doors must have opened, for McCoy and Scott hurried over to him, anxious inquiry in their faces.

"Jim… Balok… his message… it was heard all over the ship."

Someday, Kirk thought, I'll count up the ways used by my crew members to say to me, "Come on, Captain. You've got all the rabbits in the hat. We need one now. Pull it out." And the truth was, he *had* pulled many out. Oh, yes, there'd been the defeats—the failures to establish the bond of a common life between him and an alien race—yet, more often, he had succeeded in creating the sense of shared life. And those of his crew who hadn't seen him do it had been told about it.

So he had something going for him. Yet this was a hard one. Where did you find the right words for people with ten minutes to live, healthy young people denied the gradual, benevolent sense debilities with which age prepared one for the eternal stillness—sightlessness, deafness, unawareness of touch?

"Jim…" McCoy said again.

Nodding, he hit his intercom switch.

"Captain to crew."

And speaking, said the words that had come to him, perhaps from the same deeps whence his rage had come.

"Those who have served for long on this vessel have encountered apparently inimical and alien life forms. So they know that the greatest danger facing us is… ourselves and our irrational fear of the unknown…"

In his own ears, his voice sounded firm and steady. Why? He went on.

"But there is no such thing as the unknown. There are only things temporarily hidden, temporarily not understood—and

therefore temporarily feared. In most cases, we have found that an intelligence capable of a civilization is capable of comprehending peaceful gestures. Certainly, a life form advanced enough for space travel is advanced enough to eventually recognize our motives. All decks stand by. Captain out."

As he turned, he saw that Uhura's lustrous black eyes were tear-filled.

If to one of his people he had made sense, it was enough.

"Ship to ship, Lieutenant Uhura."

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

Reaching for his speaker, he said, "This is the Captain of the *Enterprise*. We came here seeking friendship and have no wish to trespass. To demonstrate our goodwill, our vessel will return the way it came. But if attacked—"

Once more the squealing feedback killed his voice; and once more he motioned for cut of the circuit.

"Mr Bailey, lay in a course away."

"What?… Course? What…?"

Sulu leaned past the shaken Bailey to move a couple of levers on his console.

"Course plotted and laid in, sir."

"Engage, Mr Sulu. Warp Factor One."

"Warp Factor—" Sulu began, and, frantically working his own controls, wheeled to Kirk.

"There's no response, Captain!"

"Switch to impulse!"

"All engine systems show dead, sir. And weapon systems."

Spock called, "Switching to screen, sir! I think I can get something visual."

He achieved it.

On the screen, the star background began to ripple like a sea flecked by plankton's phosphorescence. Then it dissolved into a still rippling but gradually firming shape—the distorted yet fairly distinct image of what could only have been Balok. The creature's long, drooping face was set in what seemed to be a permanently grotesque grimace, the nostrils of his bulbous nose upturned to expose blood-red flesh, a space-clown out of nightmare. As to his eyes, they explained the cat-mouse game-green balls, thrust out, black-slitted.

The thick lips moved.

"*You are wasting time and effort. There is no escape. You have eight Earth minutes left.*"

The picture, wavering, blanked out.

Spock's tone was that of an astronomy professor explaining "black holes" to a classroom of freshmen. "I was curious to see how they appeared, sir."

God bless Spock, Kirk thought, almost smiling. "Yes, of course you were."

Bailey, lurching to his feet, screamed.

"I don't understand this at all! Spock's wasting time—everyone else just hangs around! *Somebody's got to do something!*"

McCoy went to him quickly. "Easy, boy, easy."

"What do they want from us, Doctor? Let's find out what they want us to *do!*"

Kirk's casual tone was all the more impressive for its unimpressedness.

"They want us to lose our heads, Mr Bailey. Don't accommodate them."

"We've only got eight minutes left!"

Sulu said, "Seven and forty-one seconds."

Bailey spun, his eyes following Sulu's to the clock on the helmsman's instrument panel. Set to count off minutes and seconds, the minute hand held to "seven" while the second hand moved from "39" to "38" to "37."

Bailey, pointing to the dial, shrieked, "*He's doing a countdown!*"

McCoy seized the navigator's arm. "Practically the end of your watch. Why don't—"

Bailey jerked free, almost throwing McCoy to the deck.

"Are you all out of your heads? End of *watch? It's the end of everything!*"

Kirk said, "Mr Bailey."

It was a voice he seldom called upon because it cost too much—the paradoxes of compassion and impersonal authority… of ignorance masquerading as wisdom, of self-possession wavering toward randomness.

Bailey flailed free of McCoy. "What are you, *robots?* Wound-up toys? Don't you know when you're dying? Watches and regulations and orders—what do they mean when—?"

"You're relieved, Mr Bailey," Kirk said.

Bailey, swinging toward Kirk, started to shout a reply which, at the look on his Captain's face, emerged as a groan. The effort to control himself left him shaking.

Kirk spoke to McCoy. "Escort him to his quarters, Doctor."

Bailey strode off to the elevator alone, McCoy running after him. Kirk's eyes left its closing doors, returning to the screen.

"Lieutenant Uhura, ship to ship."

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

"This is the Captain of the Earth Ship *Enterprise*. However, it is the custom of Earth people to make every effort—"

The feedback squeal overwhelmed his words once more; but this time, Kirk made no gesture to cut off the circuit. There'd been enough bullying. If you knew what your intentions were—and they were peaceful—you gave them voice, undeterred by interruption. That was self-respect: standing by your truth. Unimaginably, the squeal ended, and Kirk, his voice calm despite the hope suddenly buoyant in him, resumed his communication to the commander of the Fesarius.

"——to avoid misunderstanding with others. We destroyed your space buoy in a simple act of self-preservation. When we attempted to move away from it, it emitted radiation harmful to our species."

No response.

Kirk went on. "If you have examined our ship and its tapes, you know this to be true."

The squeal screamed and then was gone, exiting like a bit player in a theater, making deferential way for the star's reappearance. On the screen, Balok's monstrous face wavered into focus. Its mouth said, "*You now have seven minutes left*."

The hot rage burned in Kirk again.

He couldn't afford it, not with the despair, the expectation of that new rabbit out of the hat on the faces around him. Anger like this was a weakness, not beautiful, but just a fierce resentment at one's failure to exert control, power—and the resultant hate of helplessness to do it. Waste all your vitality in resistance to factual helplessness; and what you did was to cripple the resourcefulness you needed to devise some way out of it. Yet it was trust of his resourcefulness alone that was supporting his people's courage in the face of death.

"Four minutes, thirty seconds," Sulu said.

Scott blew up. "You have an inappropriate fascination with timepieces, Sulu!"

Sulu shrugged, and Kirk, leaving his command chair, went to Spock. "What's the matter with them? They must know by now that we mean them no harm."

There was balm in the quiet, dark eyes. Half-smiling, his best friend said, "They are certainly aware by now that we are incapable of it, sir."

From the screen, Balok said, "*Four minutes*."

Kirk looked away from it "There has to be something to do! Something I've overlooked!"

Under the calm in Spock's voice, there was respect, affection—no demand for rabbits. "In chess," he said conversationally, "when one is outmatched, checkmate. The game is over."

It was safe to explode with Spock. "Is that your best recommendation? Accept it?"

Spock, realist and friend, said, "I regret that I can find no other logical one, sir."

McCoy appeared beside them. "Assuming we find a way out of this—"

"Nobody's given up yet!" Kirk snapped.

McCoy's tone changed. "Then on Bailey. Let me put it in my medical records as 'simple fatigue.' "

"That's my decision, Doctor!" Kirk said.

Turning, he crossed over to his command position, his hand on its chair back, abstracted, wrenching at his brain for some answer.

And McCoy, following him, said, "And it was your mistake. Expected too much, pushed him, overworked—"

Kirk's fist clenched. "*I'm ordering you to drop it, McCoy. I've no time for you, your buck-passing theories or your sentimentality!*"

McCoy was not subdued.

"Assuming we get out of this, Captain, I intend to challenge your action in my medical records. I'll state I warned you about his condition. And that's no bluff."

"Any time you can bluff me, Doctor—"

At once Kirk was aware that he himself had cracked a bit under the suspense and strain, and conscious too that his raised voice had made him an object of surprised dismay by the bridge personnel. He had increased fear instead of allaying it. Well, there

was nothing to do about it. He'd just have to trust to their experience of him.

Harsh, guttural, Balok said, "*Three minutes*."

Kirk, his self-possession recovered, ignored the warning to speak to McCoy. "Fine, Doctor. Let's hope we'll be able to argue it through."

Nodding, McCoy moved off, and Kirk, his hand shielding his closed eyes, suddenly removed it and, rising from his command chair, went to Spock.

"Not chess, Mr Spock. *Poker!* Do you know the game?"

Instead of waiting for the Vulcan's answer, he walked back to his chair, the idea that had come to him putting out fronds of hope and encouragement, developing, growing. And was no longer disturbed by the eyes focused on him, waiting, waiting for that rabbit of magic.

"Lieutenant Uhura, ship to ship!"

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

Kirk sat upright. "This is the Captain of the *Enterprise*…"

He paused, his voice steady. "Our respect for other life forms requires that we now give you this warning. There is one critical item of information never committed to the memory banks of any Earth Ship…"

Half-aware of Sulu's astonished face, he continued. "Since the early days of space travel, our vessels have incorporated into them a substance known as corbomite. It is a material formed into a device which prevents attack on us." He voice deepened, not to threat but into uninflected impressiveness. "If any destructive energy form touches our vessels, a reverse reaction of equal strength is created, destroying—"

Interrupting, Balok said, "*You now have two minutes*."

Spock left his position to come and stand quietly beside Kirk, who went on as imperturbably as though the palms of his hands on his chair arms weren't wet with sweat.

"—destroying the attacker. It will interest you to know that since the initial use of corbomite more than two of our centuries ago, no attacking ship has ever survived the attempt. Death has little meaning for us. If it has none for you, then attack us now. We grow annoyed at your foolishness."

At his nod to Uhura, she clicked off the circuit.

"Well played, sir," Spock said. "I believe it was known as a 'bluff.' I regret not having learned more about this… Balok." He gestured

toward the screen. "Some aspects of his face reminded me of my father."

Scott spoke. "Then may Heaven have helped your mother."

"She considered herself a most fortunate Earth woman," Spock told him coolly.

McCoy moved toward them and Kirk said quietly, "I'm sorry, Bones, I—"

"For having other things on your mind?" He smiled. "My fault. My timing was out—"

"*One minute*," Balok said, not echoed, but in precise unison with Sulu who'd been checking his instruments by the half-second. Catching Scott's glare, the helmsman shrugged, addressing Kirk.

"I knew he would, sir."

Kirk laughed. "Has it ever occurred to you you're not a very inscrutable Oriental, Mr Sulu?"

Turning, Sulu grinned. "I tried it once when I was a kid. Remember those old…" he halted, searching for the word…"images on celluloid stuff?"

"Cinema," Kirk said.

"Movies," Scott offered.

"Yes, cinema," Sulu said. "The ones about the time of the Sino-Western trouble…"

Uhura spoke. "World War III, almost."

Nodding, Kirk said, "The world was lucky it was stopped in time. None of us here would be enjoying life today…" As he noticed McCoy's grin, his words trailed off into a silence broken by Sulu.

"Well, anyway, the villains were Oriental, remember? I loved them. I used to sit in front of the mirror for hours practicing drooping eyelids, mysterious expressions. I never knew what it meant. These movies were two hundred years old, I guess, but I wanted to be like them."

Turning, Uhura smiled at him. "You never made it."

"I can't figure out why I'm like this. I don't have a drop of Western blood."

A heavy silence flowed in over the bridge, all the heavier for its contrast with Sulu's lighthearted comments; but the general anxiety was too present to continue idle conversation. Sulu had turned back to his timepiece when the elevator doors opened and Bailey stepped out, his face defensive and uncertain.

"If anyone's interested," Sulu said, ". . . *thirty seconds*."

McCoy had seen Bailey at the bridge's rear, and Kirk, registering the constraint in his face, turned and saw the navigator too. Bailey approached the command chair briskly.

"Sir, request permission to take my post."

As Kirk eyed him, Sulu said, "Twenty seconds, Captain."

There was a brief pause before Kirk said, "Permission granted, Mr Bailey."

He looked away as Bailey resumed his seat beside Sulu and his console's instrument clock, ticking off its "zero" seconds.

"Ten," Sulu counted, "? nine… eight… seven…"

Spock, almost too quiet-faced, had returned from his position to stand beside his Captain.

Sulu said, "? six… five… four… three… two… one…"

The zero count passed; and as nothing happened,. Spock spoke.

"An interesting game, this 'poker.' "

Kirk nodded. "It does seem to have advantages over chess."

Balok's voice, filtered and grating, said, "*This is the Commander of the Fesarius*." But as Uhura leaned forward to throw her hailing-frequency switch, Kirk stopped her with a gesture.

"Hold on, Lieutenant. Let's let him sweat for a change."

A minute passed before Balok said, "*The destruction of your vessel has been delayed*."

"You gotta admire him," Sulu said. "The latest news every minute."

Somebody laughed a little too loudly, the sound of the relieved guffaw followed at once by Balok's voice.

"We must have proof of your corbomite device."

Spock strode back to his station, beginning to manipulate controls as Balok went on: "*We will relent in your destruction only if we have proof of your corbomite device. Do you understand?*"

Kirk waited four minutes by Sulu's clock before commanding the opening of hailing frequencies.

"Request denied," he said.

"*You will be destroyed unless you give us this information*."

Spock, gesturing toward the screen, said, "Captain—"

Again the hideous image of Balok assumed its wavering shape. And the voice said, "*And now, having permitted your primitive efforts to see my form, I trust it has pleased your curiosity*." The

balled eyes moved slightly. "*What's more, another demonstration of our superiority…*"

To a *click*, the *Enterprise* viewing screen went dark and the Fesarius Commander added, "*We will soon inform you of our decision regarding your vessel.*"

Kirk was leaning back, stretching in a weariness induced by the accumulation of strains when Yeoman Janice Rand walked through the opened elevator doors, carrying a tray of coffee and cups. As nonchalant as though the bridge were her personal drawing room, she set down the tray and was immediately surrounded by a group of men, including McCoy.

"I thought the power was off in the galley," he said.

Pouring the steaming brew into cups, she said, "I used a hand phaser. Zap! hot coffee!"

She started off with a filled cup for Kirk, and Sulu cried, "Something's going on, Captain!"

Kirk made a swift, rejecting gesture toward the coffee, he and Spock both concentrating on the ship's viewing screen.

Indeed something was going on. A small, cell-like section of the Fesarius was separating itself from its mother ship and moving away from it but still remaining visible within the screen's frame. Spock lifted his head from his hooded viewer, saying, "Weight—about two thousand metric tons, sir."

"Yes, it appears to be a small ship."

The small, balled alien ship had moved nearer to the *Enterprise*; and as it approached still closer, its mother ship sped off, its cell-like sections dwindling rapidly in size. Accelerating fast, the thing lost shape to speed, turned to a pinpoint of light, then into a nothingness that left the tiny ship hanging before the *Enterprise*.

Balok's voice, filtered, spoke.

"*It has been decided that I will conduct you to a planet of the First Federation which is capable of sustaining your life form.*"

Kirk, a man of action, gave vent to the frustration imposed upon him by many hours of inaction by slamming his clenched fist on his command chair's arm. Near him, Sulu, leaning back in his chair, gazed up at the bridge deck ceiling, whistling a "Musetta's Waltz," which was still played on old Earth tapes of the Puccini opera. Beside him, Bailey stared at the dials on his console.

As to Balok, he went on.

"*There you will disembark and be interned. Your ship will be destroyed, of course.*"

To nobody in particular, Kirk muttered, "Of course," though at bridge stations around him, lights were blinking on. And from across the room, Spock called, "Engine systems coming on, Captain."

But Balok's sense of comedy was as grotesque as the snouted face. Filtered, the thick voice said, "*Do not be deceived by the size of this pilot vessel. It has an equal potential to destroy your ship*." And as if to give proof of the claimed power, the *Enterprise* was subjected to a jolt that sent several people sprawling.

Spock said, "Tractor beam again, sir."

Kirk went very still as the voice, going on, pushed home the point.

"*Escape is impossible. It is only that you may sustain your gravity and atmosphere that your systems are now open. Our power will lead you to your destination. Any move to elude me or destroy my ship will result in the instant destruction of the Enterprise and of every life aboard her.*"

For some reason he preferred not to examine, Kirk wanted to smile. There, on the viewing screen, was Balok's tiny ship towing the huge *Enterprise* behind it across the dark fields of star-sown space. It was absurd, and the portentous pomposity of Balok himself, his literary style, gigantically threatening, made it still more absurd.

But to his not-amused people, he said, "Our plan: A show of resignation. His tractor beam is a heavy drain on his small ship. Question: Will he grow careless?"

Bailey, gesturing toward his console, said, "Captain, he's pulling out a little ahead of us."

Spock, to check the report, emerged from his hooded viewer to announce, "He's sneaked power down a bit."

Kirk, turning, confronted a white-faced, tense Bailey who spoke hastily, "I'm all right, sir."

Nodding, Kirk said, "We'll need a right-angle course to maintain our sheer away from him no matter how he turns."

"Yes, sir."

"Maximum acceleration when I give the word."

Sulu, his eyes on the screen, said, "Yes, sir."

Minutes which everyone endured according to his duties and temperament crawled sluggishly by. Bailey constantly ran his tongue over dry lips. Sulu kept his eyes on his Captain. As to Spock, expressionless, he waited, alert as a drawn trigger.

Kirk, without turning, spoke to Sulu. "*Engage!*"

Under the prearranged pressures of switches and controls, the bridge lights dimmed to a massive power drain as the *Enterprise* lurched, shuddering. And on the screen, Balok's dwarf ship lurched too, its light beginning to pulsate. And started to flicker in power surges as it tried to compensate for the withdrawal of the *Enterprise*.

It wasn't so simple as it should have been. The Starship's engines rose to a higher and higher whine until Sulu unnecessarily reported, "It's a strain, Captain. Engines are overloading."

"More power," Kirk said.

He caught a glint of awed respect in Sulu's eyes. And wondered what the response would be if he said, "Cut it, kid." If I've taken a risk, it's because I'm alive. Living itself is a risk. If you don't want to risk, phaser yourself and die. And thought, I am as bored by excessive dependency as I am by excessive awe.

Spock, bless him, was neither dependent nor awed. Now without intonation, he said, "We're overheating, Captain. Intermix temperature seven thousand four hundred degrees… seven-five… seven-six…"

When the alarm bell rang, he shut it off. "Eight thousand degrees, sir."

On the screen, Balok's ship was glowing like a nova as it tried to fend off the pull of the *Enterprise* in their titanic tug-of-war.

The bridge teetered, rocking, as the *Enterprise* tried to pull free of Balok's ship, the whine of its engines growing to a scream.

Kirk, hard-jawed, said, "Sheer away, Mr Bailey!"

His brow sweating, Bailey battled the power conflict. And from his station, Spock said, "We're two thousand above maximum. Eight thousand four… five… six… she'll blow soon."

Even as he was speaking, the light pulsations from Balok's ship lessened. Then one of the lights flickered into dimness.

"We're breaking free, sir," Bailey reported.

All the lights on the alien ship became faint. As one blinked off and then on again, there came a sudden flare-up of brilliant light from the balled vessel to be replaced by an utter darkness. And the *Enterprise*, freed, sped away into the distance.

A relaxed Kirk, leaning back in his chair, said, "All engines stop."

"All stopped, sir," Sulu said.

Turning, Kirk studied the young face of Bailey. Its blue eyes met his straightforwardly. Nodding? he said, "Good. All hands, good."

Behind him, the elevator doors opened, and Scott, his face anxious, almost ran to the command chair. "Engines need some work, Captain! They've been badly overstrained. Bad. Can we hold it here a few hours?"

Spock left his station to take his own place beside the command chair. "If Balok got a signal through to that mother ship of his, sir…"

Kirk, nodding, said, "Right, Mr Spock. We're not home yet."

Uhura, swinging her chair around, bent her head to a turned switch on her console. "A signal, Captain… very weak." For several seconds, she just listened. Then she said, "It's Balok, sir, a distress signal to the Fesarius. His engines are out… his life-sustaining system isn't operating. He's repeating the message to the Fesarius."

"Any reply, Lieutenant?"

"Negative, sir. His signal is fading. It is so faint, I doubt if the mother ship could hear it."

On the screen before Kirk, there hung Balok's little ball, once so charged with belligerent vitality but now helpless, dull—a black nothing against the star-strewn immensities of space. And about it was something of pathos, of minuscule tragedy like the disappearance down a whale's throat of the microscopic, one-celled lives inhabiting the seas.

"Plot a course for it, Mr Bailey," he said.

Only Spock among his officers showed no surprise, not even the lift of an astonished eyebrow. Kirk, pushing his intercom button, reached for his mike to say, "This is the Captain speaking. The First Federation vessel is in distress. We're preparing to board."

His crew had been persecuted by Balok, overworked, threatened, panicked. So the right words had to be found to explain the suggestion of mercy in his announcement; and choosing them, he went on: "There are lives at stake. By our standards 'alien lives'—but still lives. Captain out."

Navigator Bailey, doing his best to keep the respectful awe out of his eyes said, "Course plotted and laid in, sir."

"Ready the Transporter Room, Mr Scott."

After a moment's hesitation, Scott said, "Aye, sir," and walked toward the elevator as Kirk, turning to Sulu, said, "Bring us to within one hundred meters, Mr Sulu. Ahead slow."

Sighing, Sulu repeated the order and Kirk, glancing around him, saw that the still lingering dissatisfaction on the faces of his people was telling him that more right words were needed. He rose from

his chair and, grasping its back, said, "Gentlemen, what is the mission of this vessel of ours? It is to seek out and make contact with life forms wherever we find them." He stopped, and, wheeling, pointed to the dark round little ship on the screen. "*Life*," he said, and after a long pause, hammered home his point. "An opportunity to demonstrate what our high-sounding words mean. Any questions?"

As nobody spoke, he went on.

"I'll take two men with me. Dr McCoy to examine and treat the aliens if possible." He was at the elevator doors when he turned. "And you, Mr Bailey."

Astounded, Bailey managed a "Sir?"

"The face of the unknown, Mr Bailey. I think I owe you a look at it."

Rising slowly from his seat, Bailey said, "Yes, sir."

Spock had left his place too. "Request permission, sir, to—"

"Denied, Mr Spock. If I'm mistaken, if Balok's set a trap for us, I want you here."

With Bailey, McCoy joined Kirk in the elevator, his medical bag in his hand. And to Kirk's "Transporter Room," the familiar relays clicked, lights flashing. After a moment, Kirk addressed McCoy, ignoring Bailey's fear-paled face. "You don't approve either, I suppose."

McCoy shrugged. "I never ask your approval of my diagnoses."

"Frightened, Mr Bailey?" Kirk said.

"Yes, sir."

"Of what?"

"Well, as far as knowing exactly—"

"Precisely my point, Mr Bailey."

As the trio entered the Transporter Room, Scott, an assistant beside him, looked up from the transporter controls to warn, "It will be risky, sir. We're locked in on what appears to be a main deck."

Nodding, Kirk said, "Air sample?"

"Breathable, Captain. In fact, a slightly higher oxygen content than our own."

"Ready, Doctor?" Kirk asked, turning to McCoy.

"No, but you won't let that stop you."

Bailey, last to enter the transport chamber, obediently stepped into the space Kirk indicated; and from the console across the Room, Scott, motioning them all to stoop, called, "On your hunkers, Captain. It reads pretty cramped over there."

Kirk, satisfied that he and his companions were safely placed, said, "*Energize!*"

With the hum of increasing power, the three dissolved into unidentifiable figures of light sparkles, the transporter effect subsiding, as they disappeared only to almost immediately materialize under a ceiling barely an inch above their heads. Around them was a subdued, soft lighting, probably indirect, but no sign whatever of smoke or trouble.

Then still bending, the three stopped dead, dumb-struck by the luxury of the room before them. The floor was covered by a rich, deep-piled form of carpet, its gold colour matched by draperies of what might have been velvet but wasn't. In the room's center, on a silver and jade-green chaise longue, a creature reclined. Was it Balok? The head was even larger than it had shown on the *Enterprise* screen, and its body had a curious limpness about it.

It didn't move as they approached it. The goggle eyes in the huge, bloated head had no lids to blink but simply stared glassily at the opposite wall. When McCoy tapped the thing with his knuckles, it gave out a hollow sound; and nodding, McCoy said, "Jim, this is a… a dummy, a puppet of some kind."

And the familiar harshness of Balok's voice said, "*I have been waiting for you*."

At the sound of it, whey all wheeled.

Kirk's first thought was, "I'm hallucinating." For the actual Balok was almost a child in size, less than four feet tall, chubby, warm and so cuddly in appearance that one could only marvel how his pudgy chest could accommodate the resonance of that voice. Smiling cherubically so that his rosy cheeks made little mounds under his twinkling eyes, he was sitting relaxedly in a small chair, robed in some shimmering turquoise material—anyway, some colour of the blue-green family.

"I'm Balok," he said. "Welcome aboard."

Moving forward, Kirk let the phenomenon of the voice go to watch the childlike hand indicate three small armless chairs.

"I'm Captain Kirk. I—"

Interrupting, their host nodded. "—and McCoy and Bailey. Sit. Be comfortable."

As the *Enterprise* men lowered themselves gingerly to the edges of what by Earth standards would be children's chairs, Balok pushed a button on the wall beside him. It slid open to make way for a servo unit bearing a bowl and four cups. Lifting a ladle, Balok dipped it into the bowl to fill the cups of his hospitality.

"We must drink. This is tranya. I hope you relish it as much as I."

"Commander Balok—" Kirk began, and was stilled by a wave of the little hand.

"I know. I know," the voice grated. "A thousand questions. But first, the tranya."

Midget though he was, this creature had deflected the *Enterprise* in its course, demoralized its crew with terrorizing threats and made a general nuisance of himself. Kirk accepted the cup he was handed but didn't drink. Nor did McCoy. Balok beamed at them. Lifting his own drink, he sipped from it. After a moment, Kirk and McCoy followed his example, Bailey, still uneasy and distrustful, preferring to merely hold his drink.

The tranya was delicious, but as Kirk replaced his empty cup on the servo, his eyes veered to the chaise longue where the enormous, hideous head lolled idiotically, half-on and half-off its cushion. Noticing, Balok said, "My alter ego, so to speak, Captain. In your culture, he would be Mr Hyde to my Jekyll. You must admit he's effective. You would never have been frightened by me. I also thought my distress signal quite clever." And with another seraphic smile, Balok added, "It was a pleasure testing you." Eyeing the manikin, Kirk said, "I see." Balok spoke earnestly. "I had to discover your real intentions, you see."

"But you probed our memory banks…"

"Your records could have been a deception on your part." As Balok spoke, he poured more tranya into his cup, offering to pour more for Kirk who declined. McCoy, however, accepted more drink, asking, "And your crew, Commander?"

Balok giggled. "Crew? I have no crew, Doctor. Just Mr Hyde and me. I run everything from this small ship." The heavy voice became unexpectedly plaintive, the chubby face wistful. "But I miss company, conversation. Even an alien would be a welcome companion. Perhaps one of your men… for some period of time… an exchange of information, cultures…"

The contrast between the powerful voice and its ingenuous confession of loneliness was appealing. Kirk was finding much to like in Balok and a considerable degree of sympathy for him,

marooned here alone in space with the bogeyman puppet on the chaise longue.

"Yes," he said. "Do you think we can find a volunteer, Mr Bailey?"

Bailey jumped from his child's chair with such enthusiasm that he hit his head on the ceiling.

"Me, sir!" he cried eagerly. "I'd like to volunteer!"

Kirk waited a long moment before he nodded, saying, "An excellent idea, Mr Bailey."

Unbelieving, Balok stared at the *Enterprise* navigator. "You will stay with me? Be my friend? You represent Earth's best, then?"

Rubbing his head, Bailey protested. "No, sir. I'm not. I'll make plenty of mistakes."

"And you'll learn more about us this way, Commander Balok," Kirk said. "As to me, I'll get back a better officer in return."

Balok broke into open, joyous laughter so infectious that Kirk laughed too.

"I see, Captain," he said. "We think much alike, you and I."

Bailey, the decision made, swallowed his whole drink of tranya.

As he finished it, Balok got to his small height; and moving grandly to the door, stood at it, waiting for his guests to join him. He looked up at them, towering over him, his face that of a child on Christmas morning. The next minute, he was all business again.

"Now, before I bring back the Fesarius, let me show you my personal vessel. It is not often I have this pleasure."

McCoy, following him through the door, shook his head with the wonder of it all, but Kirk and Bailey smiled at each other before they too stooped to move through the entranceway in the trail of robed child man.

Pausing at another small door, Balok, turning, said "Yes, we're very much alike, Captain. Both proud of our ships."

MUDD'S WOMEN

(Stephen J. Kandel)

STAR DATE 1329.1

CLEARLY, the moving light on the *Enterprise* screen was not a star. Stars do not adopt evasive tactics. They do not try to run away from starships, but stay put in their orbits. So the moving light on the screen was baffling. Captain James T. Kirk frowned at it

"An Earth vessel, Mister Spock?"

"It's hard to say, Captain. I'm getting no registry beam from it."

Chief Engineer Scott halted in his rounds of the bridge stations to look at the screen. "If that *is* an Earth vessel, he'll be overloading his engines in a minute."

The moving light changed course. They watched the maneuver in silence. Then Sulu said from his console, "He knows we're after him, Captain!"

"Stay with him." Kirk got up from his command chair to go to the Communications console, but Lieutenant Uhura shook her head. "I've tried all frequencies, sir. He either refuses to answer, or he's not reading us."

Its changed course was heading the odd light into the dense glitter of an asteroid group. Kirk's frown deepened. "Deflectors on, Mister Farrell."

The red-headed navigator, hitting a control, evoked the hum of the deflector screens. Sulu said sharply, "He's seen the asteroids, sir."

Kirk nodded. "We remain with him, Mister Farrell. He's trying to lose us among them."

Spock called, "Captain, I make it out as Earth vessel composition about the size of the small J-class cargo ships—" He broke off as his sensors gave him new, alarming news. "His engines are super-heating!"

Farrell shouted, "There go the engines now, sir!"

Kirk wheeled toward the screen. The light had burst into a flare —and winked out. Darkened and now powerless, the small vessel would be drifting at the mercy of the speeding asteroids. A somber Farrell said, "He's had it. One impact, and that'll be one dead ship. Unless—we could put our deflector screens around him—?"

Scott, his mind on his precious engines, cried, "We'll overload ourselves if we try that, Captain ! He's too far away!"

Kirk ignored him. "Mister Farrell, cover him with our deflector screen. Mister Scott, Mister Spock—stand by in the Transporter Room."

The hum of the screen rose high and strained. To the flash of red lights the alarm whined through the bridge. At his own console, Kirk was close to regretting his decision. Engine temperature was climbing, far too rapidly. The needle rose higher… higher.

"That, sir, was one of our dilithium circuits," said Sulu.

Kirk seized his intercom. "Bridge to Transporter Room. Start beaming that crew aboard!"

The lights dimmed again. Uhura, over the protesting roar of the engines, cried, "I'm getting a distress signal from them, sir!"

Kirk spoke into his mike. "We're getting a response, Mister Scott. Ask them for coordinates."

"I have, sir. We're locking on!"

Medikit in hand, McCoy hurried to the Transporter Room. But the materialization process taking place on the platform startled him. Though all the six positions on the platform were activated, only one shape was gathering substance. It gathered a lot of it. It continued to collect it for some time, until it had formed into an obscenely fat man. He wore a shabby, gilt-buttoned uniform of no known designation and a yachting cap was set rakishly on a gray, curly fringe of greasy hair. But despite the soft jowls that spilled over the collar of his uniform, McCoy did not think he looked soft. He had the unmistakable air of a man who knows his way around —and has often been around it. With an unconvincing look of narrow-eyed suspicion, he stepped from the platform.

"Not meaning ingratitude," he said, "but where is it I find meself?"

said, "On board the U.S.S. *Enterprise*."

The fat man glanced heavenward. "Praise be." He extended a pudgy hand to the doctor. "I am Walsh—Captain Leo Walsh."

McCoy ignored the hand. Spock pressed forward. "How many more in your crew?"

Yellow teeth showed in a grin. "Just a *few* more."

Scott said, staring, "Your vessel's breaking up, man! If we don't get them over here *now*…"

"Wasn't sure this was a friendly ship." Walsh pointed to the Transporter controls. "All three of 'em should be in position now."

Scott swept his hand down across the console.

Up on the bridge, the lights dimmed again and did not brighten. Kirk saw the third dilithium circuit indicator cease to function.

"We're supplementing with battery power, sir," said Sulu worriedly.

"Mister Scott! Are they all on board yet?" said Kirk into the mike.

"Only one, sir. But we're locked on to three more."

"There she goes!" yelled Farrell.

The screen flashed as an asteroid hit the darkened ship in dead center. Then the bland, oblivious stars returned. If any human life had been aboard… "Are they safe, Scotty? Did you get those others?"

"I—I can't say, sir."

Scott, like McCoy and Spock, was anxiously watching the transporter platform. It glittered with the sparkles that preceded materialization, but that was all. McCoy glanced at Walsh. Though some concern showed on his fat face, he stood composedly, almost nonchalant; a man on intimate terms with that unpredictable female, Lady Luck.

Urgently. Kirk's voice reached them. "Their ship's gone. *Did you get those three, Mister Scott*?"

"We're not sure, sir. We're locked on to *something*."

McCoy went to the console. "Scotty, what's wrong?"

"I dinna ken! With the dilithium crystals out--"

"At best," Spock said, "it will take longer on battery power."

"Never trusted the blasted thing anyway," McCoy growled. "Dematerializing people, squirting their atoms around the universe like—"

"*Now*!" said Spock. "Got them!"

The shimmering on the platform was assuming shapes—shapes that pulled a gasp from Scott. Three women slowly coalesced—three women, each possessed of a loveliness calculated to fire ardor in the breasts of saints. All the words occurred to McCoy…

"captivating"… "breath-taking"… "gorgeous." A blonde of golden dreams; a dark enchantress who might have launched the Greek armada toward Troy; a small, silvery nymph who suggested ice lit by fire within. And their appeal was frankly sexual. They smiled in open invitation to every man in the room.

Even Spock was taken aback. Scott whispered, "How about that?"

Walsh went to the platform. "It's all right, ladies. We're in good hands."

Good or bad, they intended to be in somebody's hands at the first opportunity. They made this abundantly lucid by the way they moved from the platform.

Still ignorant, up on the bridge, of the kind of guests he was entertaining, Kirk signaled the Transporter Room. There was no reply. Farrell, turning, said, "We're clearing the asteroid belt now, Captain."

"Deflector screen off. Conserve power, Mister Farrell."

As the whine of the strained engines diminished, Kirk tried the Transporter Room once more "Are you reading me or not, Mister Scott?"

Spock's troubles began as he escorted the group down the corridor. Within three minutes he counted twenty dropped jaws as crewmen forgot why they had been passing. The women swayed, deliberately provocative, highly subversive. As he herded them into the elevator, he drew a deep breath of relief.

Walsh undertook to enlighten him. "These starships are somethin'—but men are men, wherever they are. Machinery will never take it out of 'em."

Spock addressed the elevator's control console. "Deck Twelve."

Walsh glanced at his ears. "You're part Vulcan?"

Spock nodded, eyeing him calmly. Mudd whispered, silently, "So a pretty face doesn't affect you? Not unless you want it to."

It was an unfortunate remark. The women closed in around him, drawn like magnets to the lodestone of the unattainable. It was not the first time that Spock had encountered this phenomenon; he gently but firmly interposed a lever between himself and the women.

"Save it, ladies," said Walsh with a careless shrug. "This breed can switch off its feelings."

Spock's eyes flicked him, but his face was impassive. The dark girl spoke. "I apologize for Mister Walsh, sir. He's so used to buying and selling people, he—"

"*I'll* handle the conversation, love," Walsh told her.

On the way to the Captain's cabin, the men who didn't stop to gape indulged themselves in appreciative whistles: discipline on the *Enterprise* appeared to be seriously threatened. Stalking ahead of the guests, Spock very sincerely wished that Walsh's vessel *had* been a J-class cargo ship.

Kirk's back was turned as he ushered the party into the cabin, which had not been designed for the comfort of six people. Spock's left eyebrow cocked in well-controlled amusement. He'd set up this encounter, and was mildly curious to see the results. He spoke in his most formal military tone.

"The commander of the transport to see you, sir."

The fuming Kirk wheeled. "What the… hell did you think you were doing?" is what he had meant to say. He never said it.

The wave of female magnetism hit him like a blow; the three beautiful women liked what they saw, and he was going to like them. Long eyelashes swept up and down over gleaming eyes. Hips rolled sweetly in the close quarters; Spock would have sworn he could smell musk. They liked the Captain; they liked his looks, they liked his bad temper, they liked the set of his shoulders—and above all, they liked the way he was looking at them. Walsh, wearing an affable, knowing smile, let Nature take its course.

Kirk groped for his lost composure. "And—these ladies? Are they your… your crew, Commander?"

The fat man showed yellow teeth in a grin. "No, Captain. They're my cargo."

Kirk swallowed. He looked at the women. *Cargo*? These divinities of female shape? That somber beauty—the heat was too much. He ran a finger round the suddenly-tight collar of his shirt. He dragged his eyes to the unpleasantness of Mudd.

"Uh—what do you mean by *cargo*?"

"The ladies are cargo. Cargo is my business. However, if your question concerns the character of these ladies, let me assure you—"

"My business is with you!" Kirk snapped. "See to the ladies, Mister Spock." He nodded to the women, again feeling the palpable wave of attraction. "If you'll follow my First Officer—"

"I detect a note of Puritanism in you, Captain," said Walsh. "Not uncommon in lonely ship captains." He grinned again. "You can

rest easy. I absolutely guarantee the purity, the virtue, the high moral standards of these delicious—"

"Thank you, Mister! So noted!" said Kirk with ill-suppressed fury. He turned to the ladies. "If you'll follow my First Officer—"

wide eyes the hint of a slant. A faint rose flush colored her golden face as she looked deep into Kirk's eyes.

"I'm Eve," she said. "And we'd much rather stay." Her smile was intimate—meant for him alone. The sudden dimples that showed briefly promised laughter and joy—just for him. He swallowed.

Spock came to his rescue. He opened the cabin door, saying, "This way, please, ladies…"

What was it about her eyes that wouldn't let his go? Kirk was faintly aware that Walsh was enjoying his struggle. Spock, urging the women through the door, raised an eyebrow, and Kirk found himself released—and angry.

Walsh, with one last satisfied glance at the closed door, turned briskly, forestalling Kirk's first question. "Well, Captain, how could I know this was a starship—me with a cargo of lovelies aboard? A strange vessel looms up; naturally I tried to evade you."

Kirk waited. Let the fat man say his piece.

"Starship captain or no, you exceeded your rights, chasing me and mine into an asteroid shower!" said Walsh.

"Your name, please," said Kirk.

"Walsh, Leo Walsh. And you cost me my vessel. It—"

"Mister Walsh, I'm convening a ship's hearing on your actions. Mister Spock will supply you with any legal information you require for your defense. That will be all, sir."

Walsh shook his head sadly. "You're a hard-nosed one, Captain."

"And you're a liar, Mister Walsh. I think we both understand each other." He spoke into the intercom. "Security!"

When the guard appeared, Kirk said, "Escort Mister Walsh to quarters. He's to remain confined."

Walsh strolled after the guard, his bearing that of a man who has not yet summoned all his arcane resources—resources far beyond the grasp of a simple starship captain.

… So her name was Eve. A name that had meant trouble from the beginning, and looked as if it had every intention of continuing. He rubbed his cheek. A shave; that's what he needed. A shave and some time to sort out the disturbing implications of this situation.

Spock had seen the disturbing elements to their cabin. He was supervising the bridge when Sulu and Farrell emerged from the elevator. Farrell stumbled as he went toward this station, looking utterly dazed.

Sulu caught his arm, and snapping his fingers in front of Farrell's eyes, said, "You're on duty, Johnny-o. Back to reality."

Farrell tumbled into his chair. "You can *feel* their eyes when they look at you. Like something grabbing hold of you. You notice that?" Farrell looked at Sulu, and at his console, seeing neither.

"I noticed," nodded Sulu. "*How I* noticed."

Spock eyed them curiously as they settled into position. The mating instinct of human beings was a rather unattractive mystery… and extraordinarily obsessive.

"We've got trouble, Mister Spock." Scott's voice was low and urgent. "One dilithium crystal left —and it's got a hairline split at the base."

"Rig a bypass circuit, Mister Scott."

"I can't, sir. We blew the whole converter assembly."

Spock looked up sharply; this was likely to be serious. He opened the intercom to the Captain's cabin. "Spock here, Captain. You're needed on the bridge."

The guard in the Briefing Room was doing his best not to look at the three faces who sat at the table. It was the most difficult assignment of his life to date. But he held his ground when Walsh, entering with some stained papers in his hand, said, "Mind waiting outside, buddy boy?"

The guard didn't like being addressed as "buddy boy" to start with, and he had his orders,

"Sorry, sir."

Walsh hesitated. Then, joining the women, he spoke to them carefully. "The three of you, answer any questions you're asked. Don't lie—you don't have to. And don't submit to a—" He glanced at the guard. "Being healthy, you don't need a medical exam, do you, girls?"

The guard thought privately that nothing so *glowing* could be unhealthy. Seemed silly to be making such a point of it.

The women nodded. "But what if they ask us about—" said the blonde sprite in the pale blue and silver tunic.

"They won't," Walsh said hastily. He turned toward the guard again. "Don't you have some place to go, lad?"

He'd not be off duty for another hour. He stood his ground.

The smoky dark girl said tensely, "They'll notice. They'll notice we're dif—"

Walsh whirled, cutting her off. "They won't. Leave the answering to me, Ruthie—all of you, loves. We'll get—"

Eve said, "*Where* will we get? We don't have a ship, we're heading the wrong way, Harry…"

"Sst!" Walsh hissed. "Leo—Leo Walsh!" He remarked loudly to the guard, "They're lovely, aren't they, lad? As long as they think lovely and smile… they'll come out on top somewhich-way, right?" He stood so the girls could see his face, but the guard could not, "My promise on it!" The women settled back—Walsh's yellow smile took in both guard and girls.

Kirk entered the bridge at a run.

"The entire ship's power is feeding through one crystal, sir." Spock was grave.

"Then we switch to bypass circuits."

"They burned out when we superheated, Captain. That jackass Walsh not only wrecked his own vessel, but in saving his skin we —"

"If it makes you feel any better, Mister Scott, that's one jackass we're going to see skinned," said Kirk.

"It's frustrating, sir. Almost a million gross tons of vessel depending on a hunk of crystal the size of my fist," grumbled the engineer.

Spock said, "And that crystal won't last long —not pulling all our power through it." He paused. "One alternative possibility, Captain. There is a dilithium mining operation on Rigel Twelve—high-grade ore, I've heard."

"Location and distance?"

"Mister Farrell has the course, sir. Less than two days' run."

Kirk glanced at the quiet face of his First Officer. Then he swung to the Navigator's station. "Make for Rigel Twelve, Mister Farrell." He rose from the command chair. "Let's go—there's still that jackass to skin!"

Eve's clear, fathomless eyes were on him as he entered the Briefing Room. He was too conscious of her presence for ease of mind. Masking his feelings under cool formality he took his place between Spock and McCoy. "This hearing is convened," he said.

At his nod to Spock, a bright light focused on Walsh's face; the computer hummed. The fat man stirred uneasily.

"State your name for the record," said Spock.

"Walsh—Leo Walsh." said the man firmly.

A mechanical voice said, "*Incorrect*," as a buzzer sounded. The man Walsh half-rose from his chair, startled.

"Your *correct* name," Spock said.

Walsh sank back. "Gentlemen, if you're going to take the word of a soulless mechanical device over that of a flesh-and-blood—"

The computer voice interrupted. "*Full data coming on screen*."

The dark girl bit her lip. She leaned toward the fat man. "If it can read our minds—"

The man brushed her aside. "No, it can't! Just what's on record, the blasted tin-plated…"

The viewing screen clicked and produced a sharp photograph of Walsh, lines of information appearing beneath it.

"State your correct name for the record," said Spock, again.

"Harry Mudd," grumbled the corpulent commander.

Buzz.

"*Incorrect.*"

"Harcourt Fenton Mudd." He squirmed in his seat.

"Any past offenses, Mister Mudd?" said Spock.

"Of course not! I'm a decent, honest—"

Buzz… "*Incorrect. Offense record: Smuggling, sentence suspended. Transport of stolen goods. Purchase of space vessel with counterfeit currency. Sentenced to psychiatric treatment. Effectiveness disputed*."

The screen was still moving along the lines of text.

Kirk said, his voice sounding almost as cold as the computer's, "Mister Mudd, you are charged with galaxy travel without flight plan, without identification and with failing to answer a starship signal, thus effecting a menace to navigation…"

"A ship the size of mine in a galaxy the size of this, a menace to navigation?" Mudd said indignantly.

"You are also charged with operating a space vessel without master's papers."

"I have a master's ticket!" shouted Mudd, sweating.

"*Incorrect. Master's license revoked Star Date 1116.4.*"

"All right! Leo Walsh, who was to be my captain for this trip, passed away suddenly. I had no choice—I had to take 'er out myself. That's why I used his name—in memoriam. Fine man, Walsh, gone to his reward."

Kirk said, "Destination and purpose of journey?"

Triumphantly, Mudd answered, "Planet Ophiucus Six. Wiving settlers."

"Say that again, Mudd? Doing *what*?" Kirk was sure he had not heard correctly.

"I recruit wives for settlers." Mudd gestured at the three girls, watching with wide eyes. "A most difficult, but satisfying…"

"Data on witnesses, please," said Kirk, watching Mudd. Spock touched a control.

"… Marooned, isolated, no little woman to look after them…"

A light probed the three women's faces, as they flinched away. The computer hummed, buzzed erratically, and emitted a piercing squeal. The puzzled Spock, making an adjustment, removed the squeal.

Buzz-honk. "*No-no-no-no-no data-data*."

Kirk impatiently ordered the computer to go to sensor probe. Obediently, the note of the humming changed, faded and squealed again. "Any unusual readings?" Spock made further adjustments.

Eeee-hum buzz. "*No decipherable reading on females. However, unusual readings on male board members. High respiration patterns, perspiration rates abnormally high, heartbeat rapid, blood pressure abnormal*…"

"Sufficient!" snapped Kirk.

The light turned on Mudd, the hum of the computer quieted. Mudd said smugly, "You see, gentlemen? Simply three lovely ladies. Destined for frontier planets, to give lonely men the companionship they need, the warmth of a human touch—marriage, a home, a family. I look upon my work as a public service—I've given my life to it!"

Buzz. "*Incorrect*."

Mudd made a fast revision. "Uh—I am now giving my life to the work." There was no buzz. Mudd smiled a yellow smile.

Kirk glanced at McCoy, who briefly met his eye and returned to his rapt contemplation of Ruth's dark eyes.

"Did you ladies come voluntarily?" asked Kirk.

"They did indeed!" said their self-appointed guardian. "Ruthie comes from a pelagic planet, all sea ranches. Magda there came

from Halium Experimental Station…"

Eve's blue eyes were flashing. She stood up. "The same story, all of us, Captain. No men. Mine was a farm planet, with automated machines for company, two brothers to cook for and mend for—canal mud a foot thick on their boots each time they walked in," she said bitterly.

"That's fine, Evie. That'll do," said Mudd.

"No, it's not fine and it won't do! We've got husbands waiting and you're taking us the wrong way—eyeing us like we were Saturnian harem girls, or even—"

"*That's enough, Eve*!" Mudd shouted.

The girl smoothed back her golden hair with a slim hand and, sighing, resumed her seat.

"The only charges here are against Mister Mudd. Have you any defense to offer relating to these charges?"

"Only heaven's own truth, which I gave you," said Mudd sullenly.

Kirk rose. "This hearing is closed. Mister Mudd will be handed over to legal authorities at our earliest opportunity."

"And us?" said Eve, slipping out of her chair. She was suddenly close. "What happens to us? Help me." Her eyes caught his, held them. "Help all of us." He found his hand in hers. She was so lovely, alone and unprotected, in the hands of that villain Mudd—and he caught the angle of Spock's amused eyebrow. He disengaged his hand politely.

The lights went out.

"It's the last crystal," said Scott. "It's gone, sir."

The darkened screen beeped and blurred. The anxious face of Sulu appeared dimly. "Captain, Engineering Section reports that our entire life support system is now operating on battery alone."

The battery system could not sustain this drain for long. Kirks massive responsibilities flooded back in on him. The lives of his crew were at stake, Mudd's "cargo" was in a state of desperation, the ship itself was crippled. "Mister Spock," he said, "Open contact immediately with the miners on Rigel Twelve!" Mudd visibly pricked up his waxy ears. "Advise them we'll need dilithium crystals immediately upon landing."

Alone in the briefing room with the girls, Mudd flung his arms wide in an ecstasy of triumph. "Oh, you beautiful galaxy! Oh, you heavenly universe!" he cried.

The women stared blankly. He beamed at them.

"Lithium miners! Don't you understand? Lonely, isolated *wealthy* lithium miners! They make diamond and platinum miners look like children digging for seashells! I'll be the richest —" He caught sight of Eve's expression, between enlightenment and rage. "No, no, all of us. You girls want husbands? Not a mere ship's captain, Evie, I'll give you a man that can buy a whole province—a whole planet! Maggie, you'll be a countess! Ruth, a duchess, at least!

"And Harry Mudd—?" His fat little eyes took on a wicked gleam. "I'll be running this starship, Captain Kirk. You'll be taking your orders from *me*!"

Ruth leaned against the doorway of Sickbay. The crewman with the tool kit and McCoy murmured over the body function instrument panel. They nodded, and the crewman replaced the hand tools in his kit, closed it and rose. He turned toward the door, and stopped. Ruth met his eyes.

The doctor felt the tension. He glanced around. Ruth said, "May I come in?"

As she smiled dazzlingly at McCoy, he stammered, "By all means, yes, do!"

She dropped her head and looked at him through her long black hair. McCoy belatedly realized that the crewman was still goggling. "Aren't you finished, Connors?"

The crewman offered a limp smile and a mumble and slowly pulled himself out the door. The flustered McCoy collected himself as Ruth's sea-green-clad body moved into the room.

"I was wondering what this looked like, Doctor. It's fascinating. What's this screen for?" As she passed the newly repaired panel, a light blinked. McCoy threw it a surprised glance. "I wanted to see where you work, Doctor McCoy…" she smiled again.

McCoy was torn between the smile and the blinking light. But if she passed the panel again, she would becoming toward him…

"Would you cross that panel again, Ruth?"

She stopped; was she dismayed?"Why? You're not giving me an examination, are you?"

McCoy shook his head. "Oh, no. I wouldn't trust my— ' He broke off hastily to change the word "self" to "—judgment." But Ruth grinned with perfect comprehension. "Believe me—just come this way."

The light flashed again. McCoy frowned. "It's not supposed to do that. I've just had it fixed."

"I've been wondering," said Ruth, coming closer. "Will you be examining the miners on Rigel Twelve, doctor?"

McCoy was flipping switches on the body function panel. He was puzzled. "If they need it," he said absently.

"Well, haven't you asked?" said Ruth. "I mean, are they all in good health?"

"What? Oh. Yes, excellent. All three."

"*Three*?" breathed Ruth. It was like magic; three and three.

"Are you wearing some unusual perfume? Or something radioactive?"

Ruth's laugh was so full of delight that he swung round to look at her. And look again, at dark eyes brimming with pleasure.

"No," she said, "I'm just—me. Isn't it enough?"

He forgot about the blinking light

Magda was listening raptly to Farrell, her pale hair like silver to his copper. This was a woman who knew how to listen to a man describing his work. She was just as interested in the *Enterprise* communications system as she'd been in its navigation problems. Even the speed of signals passing through space, a difficult and technical matter, seemed to intrigue her. His stride took on a new firmness as passing crewmen eyed his companion with lean and hungry looks.

Eve was on a private errand. She had located the Captain's cabin and was curled up on his bed when he opened the door.

She uncurled hastily, at his expression. "I hope you don't mind?" she said timidly.

He did mind, he thought, but not very much. "As a matter of fact, Miss McHuron, I have—"

"I was trying to take a walk, Captain. And I just had to hide somewhere. The way your men were looking at me, following me with their eyes…" She rose gracefully, smoothing her brief skirt, ineffectually pulling it down to cover her long golden legs.

"I'm sorry," said Kirk. "They don't ordinarily offend in this manner, Miss McHuron. But somehow, in your case, and the other ladies with you…

"They're probably just lonely," she said softly, looking up at him with eyes that drew him closer. "I can understand loneliness."

Kirk broke the spell of her eyes with a wrench. "Yes, uh, would you—"

She touched his arm, and his eyes were compelled back to the bright mystery between her eyelashes. "I suppose you understand it even better, Captain, running a huge ship like this, so much responsibility every minute. And the men look up to you so." Kirk's collar was feeling tight again. He shuffled his feet.

"It probably appears more difficult than it is," he mumbled.

"I read once that a commander has to be a paragon of virtue. I've never met a paragon." she said with a laugh that sounded like music.

"Uh, neither have I," said Kirk, managing a mere gulp.

"Of course not. Nobody ever has. But some try to pretend. Do you, Captain?"

Kirk felt himself growing almost dizzy. "Miss McHuron," he began, trying for firmness. Her soft amusement engulfed him, surrounded him, lit by her eyes—her wonderful, beautiful, mysterious, compelling eyes. His dignity was cracking into tiny little pieces when suddenly she whirled away from him, and closed her eyes.

Something snapped. "No!" she said furiously. "I won't do it! I don't care what Harry Mudd says!"

Kirk blinked; his mind and senses were spinning wildly.

"I do like you!" she said fiercely, opening eyes that were pretty, and filling with tears. "I won't go through with it! *I hate this whole thing*!"

She was gone before he could find any part of his wits.

"Three of them," Mudd echoed. "You're sure that's what he said, Ruthie?"

McCoy's enchantress nodded and turned eagerly to Magda. "The miners—they're all healthy, fairly young—"

"Later," said Mudd. "Maggie, did you get to your communications man?"

"Of course," said the small woman with a toss of her pale head. "The head miner's name is Ben Childress. The others are Gossett and Bention, and they've been there almost three years—alone!"

"Three of them," murmured Mudd. "And three little brides has Harry Mudd…" He lumbered into a little jig step. "And dilithium crystals are worth three hundred times their weight in diamonds… thousands of times their weight in gold…"

"But they'll be down there, and we'll be up here circling, a hundred miles away," said Ruth, cutting into his euphoria.

"And there's a guard outside your door, Harry," Magda added. "You can't even get out of your cabin."

Mudd slowed and stopped, deep in thought. Then his face cleared. "No, dear ladies. One more little job for you, and it won't be Harry Mudd that's trapped! It'll be a certain gentleman named James T. Kirk."

As he spoke the name, Eve edged into the cabin and dropped heavily into a chair. The tears still shining on her cheeks, she said, "I don't like you, Harry. And I'm not happy with myself either."

Mudd nodded. "Yes. I saw you noticing the Captain."

"We're supposed to notice them!" she flared at him. Her rebellious anger dissipated in a sigh; she leaned her head tiredly on her hand. "I don't feel very well, Harry. I think we're near the time."

Solicitous, Mudd consulted a small watch as it appeared from his pocket. "No, we've got a while yet."

"Then I need a rest," said Eve. "I'm going to my cabin."

"To dream about the Captain?" said Mudd, mockingly.

She rose and went to the door. "Perhaps."

At his station on the bridge, Farrell was dreaming of blue-and-silver miracles. Kirk's irritated voice cut through the fog of his thoughts.

"Mister Farrell, I asked for a pre-orbital course!"

Farrell woke up, sheepishly. Quickly adjusting a control he said, "Pre-orbital course locked in, sir."

Kirk swung his chair around to face all stations. "Gentlemen, that is the last order I'm going to give twice. Will you kindly make an effort to direct your attention to the operation of this ship? We are now down to battery power—and it's running low!"

A worried Scott spoke. "The battery power will get us to Rigel Twelve, Captain. But it may be unable to maintain the orbit."

"Hang us up there long enough to get six dilithium crystals, Mister Scott. That's all we need." Kirk rose to meet McCoy as he stepped out of the elevator. "Have you examined any of them yet, Bones?"

"They refuse, Jim."

"Oh, come on, you're the doctor. What's going on, McCoy?" Kirk's voice lowered. "Is it that we're tired, and they are beautiful?" He sighed. "They are incredibly beautiful."

"Are they?" the doctor answered wryly. "Are they actually any more lovely, pound for pound, measurement for measurement, than any other lovely women you've known?"

"Perhaps I lack your vast experience," said Kirk.

"Granted," McCoy acknowledged. "Or is it that these women just *act* beautiful?" He shook his head. "No, strike that. Maybe it's part of it, but there's—well, more. I'm not sure I'm making sense."

"An admission I've waited years to hear! *What are they*, Bones?"

"You mean are they alien illusions, that sort of thing?"

"I asked you first."

McCoy considered his encounter with Ruth. "They are women, Jim. Human, *female* females, I'd stake my license on that. An alien smart enough to pull this would be smart enough to prevent my medical scanner from bleeping."

"I don't follow you," said Kirk, puzzled.

"I don't follow myself."

If Mudd's women were not smart aliens, they were sufficiently smart humans. Magda's flattering attentions to Farrell had paid off. Silently, she handed Harry Mudd the navigator's communicator. "Use sub-space frequency three-nine." she said listlessly.

There were lines of weariness in her face. Mudd grabbed the instrument and flipped it open. He reached Rigel Twelve immediately. A deep male voice said, "Childress here. Come in, *Enterprise*."

"Uh, this isn't exactly the *Enterprise*. My name is Harry Mudd. We have a business proposition to put to you…"

Kirk eyed the approaching Rigel Twelve on the viewscreen between anxious glances at the dropping power indicators.

"We'll make it to orbit, sir," said Farrell. Temporarily."

"Lay in," said Kirk. "Spock?"

"We can hang up here for seventy-nine hours, Captain."

Kirk sighed with relief. "That should be plenty of time. Lieutenant Uhura, ask a representative of the miners to come aboard to discuss our needs. We'll beam him up on our first pass over their camp."

"Acknowledged, sir."

In Mudd's quarters, the three women waited. All was not well; in the lowered lights, the gleaming hair of Magda seemed leaden. Their faces were drawn and pale, and their short, close-fitting costumes were hanging limply on shrunken figures.

Eve raised her head weakly. "If you find them, Harry, you know what they are? A cheat. If you really care for someone, honestly care…"

Mudd's fat little hands were wedged into his pockets. They came out empty. Ruth moaned. "Care for who, Eve? Kirk? Don't be a fool. Starship captains are already married, girl—to their ships. Wait till he has to choose between it and you. You'll see."

"Why did you hide them?" whined Ruth, twisting her hands.

"I didn't hide them! I simply put them aside in case I was searched."

Ruth burst into violent sobs. She sat weeping in her chair, huddled into her loose tunic. The shrill, sharp voice of Farrell's blue-and-silver sprite cut through the sobbing like a knife. "Find them, Harry!"

He made another frantic search of his pockets. Eve watched without interest, her eyes dim. "The mattress!" he cried. "I cut a slit…" He lunged at the bed, and fumbled out a white packet.

With hands like savage claws Ruth and Magda seized the pills he held. Eve gazed at the colored tablet doubtfully, as Mudd offered it to her. Her tongue moistened her dry lips.

"Not a cheat, Evie," he coaxed. "A miracle. For the man who could love you instead of a ship."

She accepted the pill, and Mudd turned to look at the others. He always enjoyed watching the transformation. Magda's hair slowly turning from leaden to moonlight; Ruth's voluptuous roundness of thigh and breast returning to fill out her sea-green tunic; the lines of anxiety erasing themselves from creamy complexions.

Eve's fingers closed round the pill, as Mudd's attention was wholly absorbed. She crushed it to powder, and dropped the colored dust on the floor.

As Mudd turned to have a look at her, she rallied all the energy of her nervous system, forced it to deliver a gay vitality. Mudd saw a laughing woman, as golden as ever, and was satisfied. He beamed at her.

Kirk liked the looks of Ben Childress. The head miner was a big man, muscular, powerful —the kind of man who knows his own mind and acts on what he knows. His square-jawed face was bronzed, weathered by countless battles with the blows that man, or nature, had contrived to deal him. His stride into Kirk's quarters had the drive of a well-oiled piston.

Gossett was impressive in his own way. Younger, with a whiplash body, he stood a little to the rear of Childress.

Kirk nodded. "I'm James Kirk, Captain of the *Enterprise*. This is my Science Officer, Mister Spock." Spock rose.

Acknowledging the introduction with a nod, Childress said, "Let's get right to business. You want dilithium crystals. We've got 'em."

"Fine," said Kirk. "We're authorized to pay an equitable price."

"Not sure they're for sale." Childress paused, clearly enjoying the effect of this astonishing announcement. "We might prefer a swap."

"What do you have in mind, Mister Childress?"

The big man grinned. "Mudd's women."

Kirk eyed him frostily. Trading in women was definitely not among the duties of a Starship.

Gossett chimed in. "If we like 'em, of course. We want a good look at them first."

"Right." Childress agreed. "Trot 'em out, Captain. Oh yes—and Harry Mudd. Either way, his release is a condition of the bargain, charges to be dropped."

Kirk had liked the look of Childress, but could not say the same for the sound. "I see," he said. "Anything more, Mister Childress?"

"There's no choice for you, Kirk. You beam a landing party down, and you won't find a single crystal without our cooperation."

Appalled, Kirk said decisively, "No deal."

The two men hesitated, exchanging glances. "Captain," began Gossett.

Kirk's interruption was crisp. "You're a long way out in space, gentlemen. You may need medical help, cargo runs, starship protection. Those are facts to consider, too."

There was a silence, as the men considered. It was true that they would be virtually marooned without starship contact. As they realized the seriousness of their position, Kirk could see that he had won his point.

Before Childress had spoken, the sound of laughter came from the corridor, and a radiant Magda danced past the guard and

through the half-open door. Ruth was close behind her, and the two miners' mouths dropped open. Mudd followed, unnoticed, as Eve glided past.

Ruth looked at the two, and moved in on the younger man, who swallowed, "I just bet you're Herm Gossett," she said softly.

He flushed crimson. "I—yes, ma'am. I reckon I am, ma'am."

Childress snapped out of his paralysis. He slapped Mudd on the back. "One thing I'll say for you, you're not a liar! Whee-ooh!" He stepped back and contemplated the three beauties. "And you, ladies—well, to put it mildly, you sure are welcome!"

"Childress, it's still no dea—" said Kirk. But the lights flickered and dimmed. He turned to Spock, questioningly.

"Half-power, sir. Conserving batteries."

Mudd said quickly, "I've heard they have about three days before their orbit decays and they start spiraling in."

"Thanks for the news," said Childress, heartily, with his eyes still moving from long leg to creamy shoulder.

The fat man looked at Kirk with crocodile sympathy. "I sure hate to see you suffer this kind of squeeze, Captain. But truth is truth—and the sad fact is you'll *have* to make this deal sooner or later."

Kirk was trapped, and he knew it.

Rigel Twelve was a no-man's-land of a planet. What wasn't rock was sand, a harsh grit blown by intermittent gales of cold wind that turned it to a flesh-cutting mist. Inhospitable planets were an old story to the *Enterprise*, but for sheer unrelieved bleakness, Rigel Twelve took first prize. Along with Mudd, they materialized near a low building, less than half its domed top showing above the surface dunes. Set on its metallic roof, large curiously shaped wind vanes creaked in the gusts.

Women's laughter, mixed with the lower notes of male voices, was coming from the structure. Clearly, inside there was a whale of a party.

The new arrivals crashed it. But its conviviality had reached a peak that left them unnoticed, and Kirk seized the chance to take his bearings. The room's furniture was primitive, hewn from the rock. Under the human voices the wind vanes continuously sounded, click-click-click.

Magda was sitting on the lap of the third miner, Benton. Gossett and Ruth seemed to be deeply involved with each other. Eve,

alone, was staring out of a window at the vista of rock and blowing sand.

Kirk approached Childress, who was eyeing Eve cautiously. "You've won, Mister. Now, if you please, I'll have those crystals."

"When I have time, Kirk," said Childress, his eyes still on Eve. He moved toward her. She turned, and saw Kirk. Between them flashed the bittersweet acknowledgement of lost possibility, and then she moved her lips into a smile for Childress.

"Blows like that all the time," the big man told her. She could no longer see out the window—it was darkening outside. The darkness pressed against the rough glass, pitted and blurred by endless assaults from the sand.

"I… understand that there were originally four of you," she said.

Childress nodded. "Charley Shorr stepped out into *that* last month. You can get lost a dozen feet from your own doorway if the wind comes up sudden." As he spoke, light flashed across the black sky. It was followed by a crackling noise too thin to be thunder. "Magnetic storm. That means the wind'll really rip soon."

Ruth whispered to Gossett, "What does your place look like?"

"They're all exactly like this. I figure it ain't how a house is built—it's how it's occupied." They laughed together, intimately.

Magda, on Benson's lap, smiled her sweetest smile at him. All he could muster was a soggy grin, shaded by embarrassment. It was obvious to Kirk that he was loving every minute of it. She leaned back against Benson's shoulder. "What's that noise?" she asked idly. "That clicking sound?"

"Wind vanes on the roof," he told her. "We get all our power from those rigs, and—"

She slid on his lap and began moving her hips. Extending her arms to him, she said, "Come on, dance with me!"

"But we don't have any music."

"Yes, we do! Hear it! Click-click-click—" She moved to the rhythm of the vanes.

Dancing wasn't his forte, but she was irresistible. He went to her and, locking his arms around her slender waist, led her in very small steps to the tempo of the vanes. Watching them, Ruth reached for Gossett's arm, and smiled up into his eyes. They too joined the dance.

The wind had risen, splattering sand grit against the building. Mudd watched the dancers with genuine pleasure. Impatient and anxious, Kirk was finding it hard to contain his growing irritation.

He glanced at Spock—but even his First Officer seemed to be… tolerant of these human games.

Then, Mudd's satisfaction waned as his eye chanced to cross the room. Kirk turned to see what had evoked the look of concern. In open contrast to the other couples, Eve and Childress had moved apart. She was… wilting. She looked drab and tired. Kirk could not believe his eyes. And Childress' strong face was glum.

Kirk heard him say, "Would you like to dance?"

A spasm of coughing shook her. It filled her lackluster eyes with tears. "Sorry," she gasped. "I think it's all the dust."

"That's how it is on Rigel," said Childress coldly. "All the time." He left her, and striding to the dancers, cut in on Benson. As his big arms engulfed Magda and they whirled off, Benson swore quietly. After a moment he cut Ruth away from Gossett; they were dancing dreamily close when Gossett seized Benson's shoulder.

"I'm cutting in!"

"Not on me, you're not!" said Benson, shaking him off.

Eve moved closer to Kirk, trembling and drained. She looked so woebegone, so appealing, that Kirk nearly took her in his arms for comfort. But the tension among the men had heightened dangerously; Gossett and Benson, glaring, were squaring off. Then Benson made a leap for the other man's throat.

Childress yanked them apart. "What's the matter with you?" he roared.

Eve could bear no more. She screamed. Maddened by humiliation, hurt and weakness, she burst into wild weeping. "Why don't you just hold a raffle? The loser gets me!" She flung herself toward the door, wrenched it open and was gone.

Wind and sand lashed through the open door as Kirk and Childress raced after her. Outside, the gale, smashing grit against the rocks, had broken it into fine, stinging particles.

The sky opened in a flare over Eve's head, then the blue light was gone and the darkness seemed blacker. The crackle followed her, deafening; she dropped to her knees and covered her assaulted ears with her hands. She staggered to her feet and swayed; the wind pressed her back. She had no strength to run.

Behind her, Kirk shouted, "Eve! Eve, where are you?" She wanted to answer, but her voice would only whimper. Sand pounded her face, and the wind dried her tears before she could shed them. She stumbled on, through the mist of driving sand.

Childress' search was efficient. He knew his terrain, and moved with certainty against the wind. Kirk, half-blinded, fell against a

panting Mudd. "If we don't find her soon—" Another crackle drowned out the rest. Gossett's voice sounded unexpectedly. "It's gonna blow harder before it lets up!" Barely visible, he ran past.

Mudd, on his knees, begged. "Captain, do something!"

Kirk hauled him to his feet. "One chance," he said. "The ship's infrared scanner." He reached for his communicator, eying Mudd. "And when we get up there, you are going to tell me what's behind this—what's really behind it!"

But on half-power, the *Enterprise's* scanners were sluggish.

"Checking, but not getting much, sir," said Sulu, as they reached the bridge.

"The storm is ionizing the planet's atmosphere, Captain. It's getting difficult to probe through it," added Spock.

At Kirk's elbow, Scott said urgently, "Captain, this is draining the battery even further. If we had those crystals—"

"But we don't! I didn't get them! Satisfied, Mister Scott?" snapped Kirk. Spock glanced at him, questioningly; but Spock could not know how an overload of anxiety needed expression. He shouldn't take out his temper on Scotty.

Uhura reported more bad news. "Losing communication with the miners, sir. Magnetic storm is worsening."

"Has Childress called in?"

"No, sir, he and the girl are still missing."

A downcast Scott lingered beside him. "Sorry, Scotty," said Kirk. "Just how much power do we have left?"

Mollified, Scott said, "About five hours, sir." Mudd was wringing his hands. Kirk observed his efforts to stay out of the way, and to his surprise felt a stab of pity. Even though Mudd's crazy actions were responsible for this whole mess, he was really suffering. The frantic fat man seemed to have dwindled in his shabby uniform.

Childress had found Eve. He was carrying her limp body when he at last saw the dim light of his hut. Every muscle in his body ached from his long battle with raging winds and sand. He felt sick with fatigue as he staggered to his door, and shoved it open with his shoulder. Inside, he dumped the barely breathing girl on the crude bed, and collapsed into sleep on the floor.

She stirred. Opening her eyes, she sat up painfully, looking at the room. The floor was deep in sand, and the door was still open. More sand was blowing over the heaps of dirty clothing, tumbled piles of papers, and into the corners already knee-deep in grit. She groped her way to her feet, holding the furniture for support, and

managed to reach the door. It took all her remaining strength to force it closed against the wind, and stagger back to the bed.

What passed for dawn had come when Childress awoke. He yawned, scratching his chest. Then, sitting up, he scowled as he saw his room.

Sand had been swept out. Trousers were neatly arranged on a stone chair. The bed was neatly made up, and on it lay folded shirts and sweaters. He heard metal rattling against metal. The blonde woman stood at his excuse for a stove, preparing breakfast.

He got stiffly to his feet. "I had things where I wanted them," he grumbled.

She didn't turn. "I'm eating your food. I paid for it with some chores."

He pushed her away from the stove. "And I do my own cook — *hell*!" He had touched the hot pan. He snatched his burned hand away and swore in mingled pain and irritation. She went on cooking.

"And I've not laid a hand on you," he said angrily. "Remember that!"

"Travel half across the galaxy," she said, "and male ego still sings the same old song. You want to eat or talk?" She put the plate in front of him.

"I suppose I'm to smack my lips, roll my eyes to heaven and say, 'Oh, female cooking again?'" She ignored him. He began to eat. After the first swallow, he said, "I've had better. By my own hand."

"Yes — you're tasting some of it. There are at least three layers of your leavings I couldn't scrub out of that pan."

He glared. "Find me some decent water. Then you can talk."

"If you hung your pans out in the wind, the sand would blast them clean. Or hadn't you thought of that?"

The suggestion surprised him. It also increased his annoyance.

Their breakfast was a subject of discussion aboard the lamely orbiting *Enterprise*. Childress' was wolfing the last mouthful as Spock looked up from his console. "A power unit of some kind has been in operation down there, Captain. Something small — a domestic unit, heat-producing."

"That signal came from Childress' hut!" said Sulu.

Kirk left his command chair. "Have Mister Mudd sent to the Transporter Room."

"Mudd?" said Spock, inquiringly.

Kirk said from the elevator entrance, "Yes, the name of this game, Spock."

In the still-whipping sand outside his hut, Childress was stringing a line. When he had suspended a couple of pans from it, he surveyed them doubtfully. Then, shaking his head, he muttered, "It just might work."

As he opened the door, Eve was sitting at a rock-slab table laying out cards from an odd-sized deck. She didn't speak; and Childress, baffled, wandered the room for a moment before he decided to look over her shoulder.

"Solitaire?"

"Double-Jack."

"Red eight ought to go on that black nine."

"Not in double-Jack."

"You're not only plain as an old bucket," he shouted, "you're not even good company! What the devil happened to your looks, anyway?"

"I got tired of you," she said, not looking up. "I slumped."

He kicked the rock chair. Wincing, he rubbed his foot. It was her fault. Everything was her fault—everything from his sore toe to the strange new look of his home. He grabbed her angrily and hauled her out of the chair. "You hear what I said? You're *homely*! I've got enough crystals to buy me *queens*! By the gross! And you won't even speak—"

Kirk opened the door. Childress backed away. "I haven't touched her, Kirk!"

The girl looked from one to the other. She reseated herself and resumed her game.

Mudd, pushing inside, said, "You found her out there?"

"Yes, I did. And she's been bubbling with gratitude ever since," said Childress.

"Harry. Tell him now," said Kirk sternly.

"Ah, Captain, have a heart."

"The Venus drug, Harry," prompted Kirk, tapping his foot.

Eve jumped up, scattering the cards, her hand to her mouth. Childress stared from Kirk to Mudd. "The Venus drug," he said slowly. "I've heard of it. But I thought it was just one of those stories."

"It exists," Kirk said, with an eye on Mudd. "Illegally."

"Actually," Mudd began, "It's a relatively harmless—"

"Harmless?" cried Eve.

Under Kirk's waiting eye, Mudd pulled out the packet from somewhere in his clothing, and resignedly showed the oddly shaped tablets to Childress. "It breaks down to this," he said. "Whatever you've got, the drug gives you more of it. Men get more muscular, women rounder; men get more aggressive, women more feminine. And so on and on…"

"He gave this stuff to the women before you saw them," said Kirk.

The big man's fury exploded in a bellow. "*What's happened to my partners*?"

"They're married, Ben. Sub-space radio marriage."

Childress lunged at Mudd. Kirk intervened, a hand on the miner's thick shoulder. "It's fraud, Childress. They can get out of it —if they want to."

Raging, Childress turned on Eve. "*Why*?"

Mudd moved nervously in front of her. "You can't blame the women, when it was me who—"

Childress shoved him aside. "I can. A man goes out, fights, almost dies—we all almost died… and now that we finally get the good life in our hands, you bring us women for wives that…

"You don't want wives!" Eve yelled. She confronted Childress, her eyes blazing. "What you want is this!" She snatched the packet from Mudd's hand. "Here's what you want, Mister Childress!" The pill went between her colorless lips and she swallowed.

It was as if Midas had touched her; the golden glow rose in her skin, her hair began to gleam, her bosom to lift and swell. "And I hope you'll dream about this—because you can't have it! *It isn't real*!" Seductive, compelling, she lifted her clear, hypnotic eyes to the dazed Childress.

"Is this what you want in a wife, Ben? Not a woman to love you and help you—no, you don't want that! Not a mate to cook and sew and cry and need you—but this kind… vain, selfish, useless! Then here she is." She posed, preening herself.

Ben stared at her, speechless. Kirk said, "Quite a woman, Childress. Don't you agree?"

"A fake. Pumped up by a drug."

"No. By herself. She took no drug."

Eve dropped her pose and exclaimed. "But I swallowed it!"

"Colored gelatin," Kirk said, smiling.

Mudd nodded. "They took my drug and replaced it"

The woman, looking down at herself, was quiet. Then, she looked from one to the other of the men. Slowly she became aware that she didn't feel quite the same as she had before—under the drug. Kirk was charming, and compassionate. She gave him a smile of special… tenderness, not seduction. And Mudd—an absurd rogue; so clumsy in his mischief. And the big miner, proud of his appalling domestic arrangements and dreaming of buying queens. She grinned with real delight. She loved them all.

The Captain was smiling at her. "There's only one kind of desirable woman, Eve—the one who knows she's Woman."

She winked at him.

He turned to Ben Childress. "Now, sir, I've gone as far with you as I intend to. I want those dilithium crystals and I want them now," He opened his communicator. "*Enterprise*, this is Kirk."

"Spock here, Captain."

"Stand by." He faced Children. "Do I bring down a search party?"

Confused and shaken, with his eyes on Eve— who had relaxed into neither glamorous siren nor frump, but something in between, something *comfortable*—Childress said, "No. The crystals are here, and you're welcome to them."

"We'll be beaming aboard—with the dilithium, Spock, stand by."

They all heard Scott's "Whew!" and then Spock's "How many, Captain?"

Uncertain, Eve looked at Ben. For a brief space he hesitated. Then he said, "Eve'll stay. For the day at least. We want to talk."

Mudd was peering through a scarred window. "Rather go to prison," he said, "than live in this forgotten hole." He turned his jowled, tired face to Kirk. "On second thought, maybe not. Could you see your way clear to leaving me behind, Captain? This place would be punishment enough."

"Two of us, Mister Spock." Kirk closed his communicator. "I can't leave you here, Harry, but I'll appear at your trial as a character witness— if that will help."

Mudd threw up his hands. "They'll throw away the key to my cell!"

The *Enterprise*, crystals in place at last, was heading out. McCoy, at Kirk's side, said, "Quite a talk you must have had down there. Ever consider going into the snake-oil business! That's patent medicine to *you*, Spock."

“Why work your side of the street?” said Kirk lightly. “Something wrong, Mister Spock?”

“No, Captain. I’m just glad the affair is over. A most incomprehensible and annoying emotional episode.”

McCoy hit his chest “Right smack in the old heart.” He eyed Spock, and then punched himself in the lower abdomen. “Sorry. In your case, about here.”

Unruffled, the Vulcan said, “The fact that my internal arrangements differ from yours, doctor, pleases me exceedingly.”

Kirk grinned. It was good to be home again.

“Out of orbit, sir,” said Farrell.

“Ahead full.”

“Ahead full, Captain,” Sulu said.

THE ENEMY WITHIN

(Richard Matheson)

The planet's desert terrain had yielded an interesting roundup of mineral and animal specimens, and Kirk was busy checking the containers for beamup to the *Enterprise* when a gust of icy wind blew a spray of sand in his face. Beside him, Sulu, holding a meek doglike creature on a leash, shivered.

"Temperature's beginning to drop, Captain."

"Gets down to 250 degrees below at nightfall," Kirk said. He blinked the sand out of his eyes, stooped to pat Sulu's animal—and wheeled at the sound of a shout. Geological technician Fisher had fallen from the bank where he'd been working. From shoulders to feet his jumpsuit was smeared with a sticky, yellowish ore.

"Hurt yourself?" Kirk asked.

Fisher winced. "Cut my hand, sir."

It was a jagged, ugly cut. "Report to Sickbay," Kirk said.

Obediently Fisher removed his communicator from his belt. In the *Enterprise* Transporter Room, Scott, receiving his request for beamup, said, "Right. Locked onto you." He turned to Transporter technician Wilson at the console. "Energize!" he ordered.

But as Fisher sparkled into shape on the platform, the console flashed a warning red light. "Coadjustor engagement," Scott said hastily. Wilson threw a switch. The red light faded.

Materialized, Fisher stepped off the platform.

"What happened?" Wilson asked.

"Took a flop," Fisher told him.

Wilson eyed the yellowish splatterings on his jumpsuit. Some lumps of the stuff had fallen from it to the platform's floor.

"Took a flop onto what?" Wilson asked.

"I don't know—some kind of soft ore."

Scott had reached for a scanner device. He ran it over the jumpsuit. "That ore's magnetic," he said. "Decontaminate your

uniform, Fisher."

"Yes, sir."

Frowning, Scott examined the console. "It acted like a burnout," he grumbled to Wilson. "I don't like it."

Kirk's voice broke in on his concentration. "Captain Kirk, ready for beamup."

"Just a moment, Captain." Scott tested the console again. "Seems to be OK now," he told Wilson. "But we can do with a double check. Get me a synchronic meter." Returning to his speaker, he said, "All right, Captain. Locked onto you." Then he activated the Transporter.

There was an unfamiliar whine in its humming. Hurriedly dialing it out, Scott decided to warn Kirk he was delaying the beamup. But the process had already begun. The engineer looked anxiously toward the platform. In its dazzle Kirk stood on it, dazed-looking, unusually pale. As he stepped from it, his legs almost buckled. Scott ran to him. "What's wrong, Captain? Let me give you a hand."

"Just a little dizzy, that's all," Kirk said. "I'm sure it's nothing serious." He glanced around him. "You're not leaving the Transporter Room untended to look after me, are you?"

"No, sir. Wilson's just gone for a tool."

The door closed behind them. More sparkle appeared on the platform. A figure took shape on it. When it had gathered solidity, it could be seen as a perfect double of Kirk. Except for its eyes. They were those of a rabid animal just released from a cage.

It looked around it, tense, as though expecting attack.

Wilson opened the door. Immediately sensing that tension, "Captain," he said, "are you all right?"

His reply was a hoarse growl. The double glanced around it again seeking some means of escape. It licked its dry lips. Then it saw the door Wilson had left open.

Out in the corridor Kirk was saying, "I can manage now. You'd better get back to the Transporter Room, Scotty."

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks for the help."

"I wish you'd let Dr McCoy give you a look-over, Captain."

"All right, Engineer. I'll have him check my engines."

He didn't have far to go. At the next cross passage he collided with McCoy. "I think we need a control signal at this cor—" McCoy broke off to stare at Kirk. "What's happened to you?"

"I don't know," Kirk said.

"You look like you ran into a wall."

"Is that your official diagnosis?"

"Never mind my diagnosis! Go and lie down. I have a malingerer to be treated. Then I'll come and check you."

"If you can find me," Kirk said—and moved on down the corridor. McCoy followed his going with puzzled eyes. Then he hastened on back to the waiting Fisher in Sickbay.

The soiled jumpsuit had been discarded. McCoy cleaned the cut hand. "Like to get off duty, wouldn't you?" he said. "Take a little vacation."

Fisher grinned. And McCoy, swabbing the wound, lifted his head at the sound of the opening door.

The double spoke at once. "*Brandy*" it said.

The demand, the manner, the whole bearing of replica Kirk was uncharacteristic of the real one. Fisher's presence put a brake on McCoy's amazement. He decided to ignore the demand. "Don't go running back to work now," he told Fisher. "Keep the bandage moist with this antiseptic. Take the bottle along with you."

"Yes, sir." Fisher held up his swathed hand, smiling at the double. "It isn't too bad, Captain."

The remark was ignored. McCoy turned to the double standing in the doorway and gestured to it to enter the office. "Sit down, Jim," he said. "I think we'd better…"

He stopped. The double had gone to the locked liquor cabinet, its nails clawing at it. "I said *brandy*" it said.

McCoy stared, dumbfounded. The double was snarling now at its failure to pry open the cabinet's door. Nervous, uneasy, McCoy tried again. "Sit down, Jim."

A shudder passed through the double. A savage whisper broke from it. "*Give me the brandy!*"

"What is the *matter* with—" McCoy began. The clawing hands were lifting with the clear intention of smashing the cabinet's glass.

"Jim!" McCoy shouted.

The double whirled, crouched for a leap, its fists clenching. Instinctively McCoy recoiled from the coming blow. Then he recovered himself. "All right, I'll give you the brandy. Sit down!" But he didn't give the brandy. As he unlocked the cabinet door, he was shouldered aside—and the double, seizing a bottle of liquor, made for the door.

"Drink it in your quarters, Jim! I'll see you there in a…"

The door slammed shut.

McCoy, striding over to his viewing screen, flicked it on. Spock's face appeared. "Anything peculiar happen down on that planet's surface, Mr Spock?"

The cool voice said, "One slight accident, Doctor, which I'm sure won't tax your miraculous healing powers."

But McCoy was too disturbed to rise to the bait. "Did it involve the Captain?"

"No."

"Well, there's something very wrong with him. He just left my office after carrying on like a wild man."

The wild man, rampaging down the corridor, suddenly had a mind to private drinking. A sign over a door declared it to be the entrance to the quarters of Yeoman Janice Rand. The double touched it, conceiving unmentionable notions—and slipped through the door. Inside, it uncorked the bottle. Tipping it up, it gulped down the brandy in deep swallows. Then it grunted in pure, voluptuous pleasure. The bite of the brandy down its throat was too seductive to resist the impulse to swallow some more. Eyes half-shut in sensual delight, its face was the face of a Kirk released from all repressions, all self-discipline and moral order.

Kirk himself had not entirely recovered from his mysterious vertigo. Alone in his quarters, he had his shirt off, and was flexing his neck and shoulder muscles to rid his head of the whirling inside it. When the knock came at his door, he said, "Yes?"

"Spock, sir."

"Come in," Kirk said, pressing the door's unlocking button.

"Dr McCoy asked me to check on you, sir."

Shouldering back into his shut, Kirk said, "Why you?"

"Only Dr McCoy could answer that, Captain."

"He must have had a reason."

"One would assume so," Spock said mildly, his keen eyes on Kirk's face.

"Well, Mr Spock? I hope you know me next time we meet."

"Dr McCoy said you were acting like a wild man."

"McCoy said that?" Kirk paused. "He must have been joking."

"I'll get back to the bridge now," Spock said.

"I'll tell McCoy you were here."

As the door closed, Kirk, puzzled by the interchange, reached for his Captain's coat.

On Deck 12, corridors above him, his double was feeling the effects of the brandy. But at the sound of a door sliding open, it was sober enough to take hiding in the bedroom of Yeoman Rand's quarters. It watched her enter. When she had placed her tricorder on a table, it stepped forward into her full sight.

It was not Kirk's custom to visit the bedrooms of attractive female members of his crew. Janice was shaken by his appearance in hers. She decided to smile. "This is an unexpected pleasure, sir," she said gamely.

The smile faltered at the suggestive leer she received. "Is there something I can—?" Then she tensed. The double had come so close to her she could smell the brandy on its breath. She flushed at such male nearness, fought back an uprush of embarrassed apprehension and said, "Is there—can I do something for you, Captain?"

"You bet you can," the double grinned. "But Jim will do here, Janice."

Neither the words nor the tone fitted the image of Kirk that existed in the mind of Janice Rand. She had never seen him anything but coolly courteous toward women members of his crew. Since the day she had joined it, she had thought of him as the unobtainable but most desirable man she'd ever met. However, that was her own secret. It just wasn't possible that he was obtainable, not Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*. And by a twenty-year-old, obscure yeoman named Janice Rand. He'd been drinking, of course; and when men drank… Nevertheless, of all the women on the ship, this handsomest man in the world had sought her out; and by some miraculous quirk of circumstance seemed to be finding her worthy of his sexual interest. She suddenly felt that she, along with her uniform, had gone transparent.

"I—Captain, this isn't—" she stammered.

"You're too much woman not to know," the double said. "I've been mad for you since the day you joined the ship. We both know what's been inside us all this time. We can't say no to it—not any more, not when we're finally alone, just you and me. Just try to deny it—after this…"

It swept her into its arms, kissing her hard on the lips. For a moment she was immobilized by the shock. Then she pulled back. "*Please*, Captain. You—we…"

The handsome face tightened with anger. She was kissed again harshly; and with a little moan, she tried to pull free. She was jerked closer. Now the kisses pressed against her throat, her neck.

"You're—hurting me," she whispered.

"Then don't fight me. You know you don't want to."

She stared into what she thought were Kirk's eyes. In some shameful way it was true. She *didn't* want to fight the Captain's kisses. Only how dare he presume to know it?

"Shall I make that an order, Yeoman Rand?"

This time the kiss on her mouth was openly brutal. Janice, infuriated by exposure of a truth she wanted neither to know herself nor be known to anyone else, began to fight in earnest. She scratched the double across its handsome face. It pulled back; and she dashed for the door. She was grabbed as it opened—but out in the corridor, Fisher, returning to his room with the antiseptic liquid he'd forgotten, had seen the struggling pair.

"On your way!" It was Kirk's command voice.

Relief surged through Janice. *The Captain had implicated himself in this disgraceful scene*. If there was penalty to pay in loss of his crew's respect, he'd have only himself to blame. She screamed, "Call Mr Spock!"

Fisher gaped at her. "*Call Mr Spock!*" she screamed again. Fisher broke into a run. The double tightened its hold on her. Then, realizing how the witness menaced it, it rushed out into the corridor.

Fisher made it to a wall intercom. "This is Fisher of Geology! Come to Deck 12, Section…"

The double caught him in midsentence. Fisher was spun around to take a smashing right to his jaw. It was his turn to scream. "Help! Section 3!"

The scream came through to the bridge. Spock bolted for the elevator, shouting "Take over!" to navigator Farrell.

Deck 12 was deserted. Spock hesitated. Then, starting down the corridor, he slowed his run to a wary walk, his sharp Vulcan eyes searching. After a moment, he stooped to run a finger along a

dark streak on the flooring. When he looked at the finger, it was red, wet with blood.

Its trail of drops led to the quarters of Yeoman Rand. He opened the door. She was sitting on a chair, her uniform disheveled, her eyes blank, stunned. Near her, Fisher lay on the floor. She didn't speak as Spock bent down to him. His face was a mass of mangled flesh and blood.

"Who did this to you?" Spock asked. Fisher's torn lips moved. "Captain Kirk," he whispered. Then he subsided into unconsciousness.

Kirk asked his question very quietly. "And Yeoman Rand says I assaulted her?"

"Yes, sir," Spock said. "And technician Fisher also accuses you of assault upon her and himself."

"I've been here in my quarters for the past half hour," Kirk said.

Spock held up the nearly empty brandy bottle.

"What's that?" Kirk said.

"The bottle of brandy Dr McCoy says you took from his office cabinet. I found it in Yeoman Rand's room with Fisher."

"McCoy says *I* took that brandy?" The whirling in Kirk's head had come back. He shut his eyes against its wheeling stars. Then he rose. "Let's find out what's going on in this ship." He moved past Spock into the corridor.

The elevator door closed behind them—and the double, a darker shadow in the shadows of a cross passage, slipped quietly out into the corridor. Panting, it pried at the door of Kirk's quarters. It got it open. Inside, the lock on the panel of the sleeping compartment caught its eye. It depressed the unlocking button. It relocked the panel behind it and fell across the bed, sighing with exhaustion. Then it buried the replica of Kirk's face in a pillow to shut out the sights and sounds of a world that hated it.

In Sickbay, Yeoman Rand was saying, "Then he kissed me—and said we—that he was the Captain and could order me to—" Her eyes were on her cold hands, safer to look at than Kirk's face. She had addressed her words to Spock.

"Go on," Kirk said.

She looked at him now. "I—I didn't know what to do. When you started talking about—us—about the feeling we've been—hiding all this time…"

"The feeling you and I have been hiding, Yeoman Rand?" Kirk said. "Do I understand you correctly?"

"Yes, sir." In desperation she twisted around to McCoy. "He *is* the Captain, Doctor! I couldn't just—" Her face tightened. "I couldn't *talk* to you!" she burst out at Kirk. "I had to fight you, scratch your face and kick and…"

"Yeoman Rand," Kirk said. He went over to her, pretending not to notice how she shrank from his approach. "Look at me! Look at my face! Do you see any scratches on it?"

"No, sir," she whispered.

"I have been in my quarters, Yeoman. How could I have been with you and in my own quarters at one and the same time?"

She wrung her hands. "But—" Her voice broke. "I know what happened. And it was you. I—I don't want to get you into trouble. I wouldn't even have mentioned it if technician Fisher hadn't seen you, too, and…"

"Yeoman," Kirk said, "it wasn't *me!*"

She began to cry. She looked very small, very young in her rumpled uniform. Kirk reached out a compassionate hand to her shoulder—but she shied away from his touch as though it might burn her.

Spock said, "You can go now, Yeoman."

Sobbing, she got to her feet. As she reached the door, Kirk said, "Yeoman." She stopped. "*It was not me*," he repeated. But she went on out the door without looking back.

Spock broke the silence. "Captain, there is an impostor aboard this ship."

It was to be expected from Spock. Faith to the end—that was Spock. Kirk pulled his uniform collar away from his neck as though it were choking him. After a moment he went to the door of Sickbay's treatment room where McCoy had gone back to work on the battered Fisher. He was busy, of course; too busy with Fisher to look at him. But the prone Fisher looked at him from the sheeted table—and in his eyes there was open scorn.

The intercom buzzed; and Scott said, "Captain, can we see you in the Transporter Room for a minute?"

Kirk took the scalding memory of Fisher's look with him. If Spock hadn't silently joined him, he wondered if he'd have found

the courage to respond to Scott's call. Had he, too, heard the interesting details of his Captain's recent activities? But Scott's total concern seemed to be the still defective Transporter. He looked up from the console as Kirk entered. "It's a complete breakdown, Captain." He turned his head to say to his technicians, "Continue circuit testing." The meek, doglike creature collected from the planet was lying beside the console. Scott pointed to it. "We beamed this animal up to the ship, sir, and…"

"And what?" Kirk said.

Scott paused. "The animal is here. But it's also over there in that specimen case."

He left the console to go over to the case with Kirk and Spock. A fierce growl greeted them. Scott cautiously lifted the lid. The beast inside bared its teeth, its lips flecked with the foam of its fury. Scott hastily dropped the lid over its leap at them.

"It appears to be the twin of the other animal," Spock said slowly. "Except for the difference in temperament, they might be one and the same."

Scott had hurried back to the console to pick up the quiet creature. Stroking it, he said, "A few seconds after they sent this one up through the Transporter, that duplicate of it appeared on the platform. If this had happened to a man—it's some kind of opposite."

The intentness on Kirk's face was naked. Scott went on. "One beast gentle like this—and one savage, wolfish, this one and *that* one—some kind of ferocious opposite. Captain, till we know what's gone wrong with the Transporter, we dare not use it to beam up the landing party!"

"Oh, my God…"

The whisper was wrenched from Kirk by the force of sudden revelation. It was no impostor who was loose on the *Enterprise*. What was loose on it was his own counterpart—the dark, brutish aspect of human nature which every mortal carries within him from birth to the grave. His Cain was roaming the *Enterprise* in a mindless, murderous search for a vengeance that would appease the bitterness of years of denial—the years it had spent as a prisoner of conscience, of duty, of responsibility. Somehow it had got free from its embodiment in him, and wearing his face, using his voice, wandering his ship, had found its release.

He gradually became conscious of Spock's eyes. The Vulcan had taken the lamb-gentle animal into his arms. Something in the way he held it stilled the turmoil in Kirk's soul. He was able to speak.

"Do you know what caused the animal to divide in two, Scotty?"

"We think we do, sir. When Fisher came up, his clothes were splashed with some soft, yellowish stuff. He said it was ore. Some of it fell on the Transporter platform. When we scanned it, we found it contained unknown magnetic elements. Maybe it caused an overload. We can't tell—not yet."

"Is the Transporter working at all?"

"Yes, sir. But to use it to bring up the landing party—they might all be duplicated like you—" He caught himself. "Like the animal, Captain."

So Scott *had* heard. "How long will it take to locate the trouble?"

"Can't say, sir."

Kirk fought for calm, for reason. "We can't just leave those four men down there. They'll freeze to death. At night that planet's temperature sinks to 250 degrees below zero."

"We're doing everything we can, Captain!"

Kirk looked at the Transporter platform. What was the secret it refused to divulge? He'd emerged from it whole, unsplit, a thousand times. Why not this last time? *What had happened?* When and how had he been divided in two halves like a one-celled organism reproducing itself? The whirling in his head was back once more. And the platform looked back at him, empty, its secret still withheld.

Spock had come to stand beside him. "About this double of yours, Captain."

Kirk started like a man aroused from nightmare. "Yes, we've got to find him. Search parties, Mr Spock—we've got to organize search parties."

"We can't risk killing it," Spock said. "We have no data—no way of knowing the effect of its death on you."

So Spock understood. "Yes, that's right," Kirk said. "We don't know that—but the men must be armed. All men to be armed with phasers locked to the stun setting. He's to be taken without—if anyone fixes to kill, he won't die—it's not the way to get rid of him…"

Spock noted the breaks between thoughts and words. They were disjointed, disorganized. No, there was no doubt. This Kirk was not the integrated, decisive Kirk he knew.

"It will be difficult to order the search parties to capture a being who so closely resembles you, Captain."

"Tell them—" Kirk looked at him helplessly. "I'd better make an announcement to the entire crew—tell them what's happened as well as I can. It's a good crew—they deserve to be told."

"I must object, sir," Spock said. "You are the Captain of this ship. You cannot afford to appear vulnerable in the eyes of your crew. It is your damnable fate to have to seem perfect to them. I'm sorry, sir. Yet that is the fact. They lose their confidence in you—and you lose your command."

Kirk pressed, his forehead between his hands. "I know that, Mr Spock. Why did I forget it?" He turned away, then stopped without looking back. "If you see me slipping again, your order is to tell me so."

"Yes, Captain."

His back stiff, Kirk walked out of the Transporter Room. In the bridge he touched the back of his command chair before he took his position in it. Command—no weakness, no fault, no hesitation. Bracing himself for the front of perfection, he flicked on his intercom. "This is the Captain speaking. There is an impostor aboard this ship—a man who looks exactly like me and is pretending to be me. The man is dangerous. Utmost caution is to be observed. All crew members are to arm themselves. The impostor may be identified by scratches on his face."

The message reached the double. It sat up quickly on Kirk's bed. "Repeat," came the voice from the intercom. "The impostor may be identified by scratches on his face. Search parties will report to Mr Spock for assignment. All hand phasers will be set to stun force. The impostor is not to be injured. Repeat. The impostor is not to be injured."

The double touched the scratches on its face. Then it got up to go to the mirror and stare at its reflection. "Impostor!" it muttered to itself. "*I'm Kirk!*" it shouted at Kirk's image on the intercom viewing screen. A gust of fury shook it. It seized a metal box from the dresser and hurled it at the screen. The sound of crashing glass frightened it. "I'm Kirk," it whimpered to its reflection in the mirror. The scratches showed red, unhealed. To examine them more closely, it pushed aside a jar of medicated cream. The loosened lid fell off. The double dug its fingers into the cream, looked once more at the scratches and began to rub the cream into them. It made them feel better. It also hid the weals. The double grunted with satisfaction. It was dabbing more of the concealing cream into the cuts when it heard running sounds from the corridor outside.

When the sounds had gone, it unlocked the door. Moving out into the working area of Kirk's quarters, it slid its entrance panel half open. Wilson, carrying some Transporter equipment, was hurrying down the corridor.

"Wilson!" the double called. "Come here!"

Wilson came.

"Give me your weapon belt!"

"Yes, sir."

As he handed over the belt, Wilson saw the smeared cream on its face. But his suspicion came too late. The double had the phaser out of the belt. It struck him on the jaw with its butt. When Wilson fell, it stooped to pound his jaw with the heavy butt. Then it dragged him into Kirk's cabin. The bloody phaser still in hand, it nodded to itself—and walked casually out into the corridor.

Down on the planet's surface it was growing dark. Sulu and his three crewmen were gathering rocks to erect a wall against the rising wind. Frost had already whitened the dismal landscape as far as they could see.

Over his communicator, Kirk said, "Mr Sulu, how is the rock shelter coming?"

"It's a compliment to these rocks, sir, to call them a shelter. It's down to 50 below zero now, Captain."

They were not equipped with thermal clothing. It was hard to say, "Kirk out." He might better have said, "Kirk down and out." That was the truth. In his command chair, he had to steady himself against another attack of vertigo. "We've got to get those men up!" he said to Spock. But Spock was taking a report from one of his search parties. "Deck 5 Sections 2 and 3 completely covered now, sir. Result, negative. Proceeding to Sections 4 and 5."

"Acknowledged," Spock said and flicked off his audio—but only to flick it on again to another intercom call.

"Search party number eight, sir. Transporter technician Wilson has just been found crawling out of the Captain's cabin. He's been badly beaten. He says the impostor attacked him, called him by his name and took his phaser."

"Get him to Sickbay," Spock said. "Then continue your search."

"We must locate this—this opposite of mine before he—" Kirk broke off. "But how, Spock, how?"

"It is apparent, sir, that it possesses your knowledge of the ship, its crew and devices. That being so, perhaps we can foresee its next move. Knowing how this ship is constructed, where would you go to elude a mass search, Captain?"

For the first time since his disaster, Kirk spoke without hesitation. "The lower level. The Engineering deck. Let's go!"

In the elevator Spock removed his phaser from his belt. Without looking at Kirk, he said, "I'm setting this, not to the kill cycle, but to the stun one, sir. What about your phaser?" Kirk took the hint; and Spock said, "This thing is dangerous. Don't you think we'll need some help if we find it?"

The torture of indecision was back. Finally Kirk said, "No. If we find him, I don't want anyone else around but you." He had stepped out of the elevator when Spock called, "*Captain!*"

Kirk turned.

Spock said, "You ordered me to tell you…"

"I said *no*, Mr Spock. No one but you."

The lower level of the Engineering deck held the vast complex that powered the *Enterprise*. It was a cavern of shadows, broken by glints of gleaming machinery, its passageways narrowing, widening, narrowing again to crisscross other passages. The droning hum of its huge nuclear energizers reverberated against its metal walls. Suddenly, as he rounded a dynamo, Spock realized he was alone. He turned to retrace his steps in hope of locating Kirk again.

Kirk, unaware he had lost Spock, looked at the phaser he held at the ready. The sight of it repelled him. A suicide weapon was what it was. The life it would fell was part of his own. He replaced the phaser in his belt.

And his Cain saw him do it. Crouched between two power generators, the double had heard his approaching footsteps Its features tensed with its curious mixture of fear and ferocity. Its phaser aimed, it moved away from its shelter for a full confrontation.

Kirk stopped dead. As he recognized his own face in the Other's face, a chill passed over him. This nameless Thing belonged to him more utterly than any name his parents had given him. The two Kirks stared at each other in a kind of trance. Then, as though he were drawn by a power as unknown as it was powerful, Kirk stepped toward his double. It raised its phaser.

Kirk spoke. His voice sounded strange in his own ears. It was solemn with the prophetic tone of a mystic suddenly endowed with

an incontrovertible truth. "You must not hurt me," he said. "You must not kill me. You can live only as long as I live."

Uncertainty flickered over the double's face; and Kirk, in a kind of dream, knew he was seeing the reflection of his own new uncertainty.

Then the hesitation faded. "*I* don't need you!" the double said. "I don't have to believe what you say. So I *can* kill you!"

Its finger was on the kill trigger. Leaping, the momentum of his leap lending force to his clenched fist, Spock lunged from behind the generator to land it, hammer-like, on the double's chin. It fell. Its phaser fired, the beam striking a machine unit behind Kirk. It flared into glow and collapsed.

Spock looked down at the sprawled double. "I fear," he said, "that the ministrations of Dr McCoy will be needed."

The fear was well-founded. Consciousness was reluctant to return to the double. Each in his different way anxious, Kirk and Spock watched McCoy as he stooped over the still figure in its bed. McCoy worked silently. After a moment, Kirk went to the viewing screen. Turning it on to Engineering, he said, "What about those Transporter circuits, Scotty? They're all checked through now, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir. And we thought we'd corrected the trouble. But now something else has gone wrong."

"What?" Kirk demanded.

"We don't know, sir. We're working on it. Is that all, Captain?"

Once more Kirk was unable to rally either a yes or a no. There was an uncomfortable pause. Finally Scott said, "Then I'd better get back to work, sir."

It would be darker on the planet. Kirk cried out, "Find out what's wrong, Scott! And fix it in God's name! Four human lives are depending on that Transporter!"

Scott said stiffly, "We're doing our best, sir."

Kirk leaned his forehead against the frame of the viewing screen. "I know, Scotty. You always do your best. Keep me posted, will you?"

"Yes, sir." The voice had relaxed.

Over at the bed, McCoy had completed his examination. "How is —he?" Kirk asked.

"Pulse and blood pressure high," McCoy said. He glanced at Spock. "Probably due to that sock on the chin."

"It was necessary, Doctor."

"This—creature will be recovering consciousness soon. As I have no idea at all about its mental state, I can't give it a tranquilizer. I think we'd better bind it."

He looked at Kirk for authorization. Kirk was suddenly oppressed by a sense of suffocation. The heavy tonnage of command responsibility seemed to be crushing him. He shook his head to try and clear it of the dizziness. "Yes," he said, "all right. I just wish someone would tell me what's the matter with *me*."

"You are losing the power of decision, Captain," Spock said.

"What?"

McCoy was busy binding the double but not so busily that he couldn't direct a glare at Spock. But the Vulcan continued, cool and unruffled. "Judging from my observations," he said, "you are rapidly losing your capacity for action. There's hesitation in time of crises—loss of perception. Captain, you refuse to defend yourself. You refused to demand adequate assistance when we went down to the Engineering level whereas you should have placed yourself in guarded isolation until the impostor was captured." He paused. "You have dismissed men for less hesitation, less passivity in the face of danger."

"Make your point, Spock!" shouted McCoy.

"Point?"

"You *have* one, I presume," McCoy said.

"I am analyzing, Doctor; not point-making."

"It's the Captain's guts you're analyzing! Are you aware of that, Mr Spock?"

"Vituperation, Doctor?"

Composed, unmoved, Spock went on. "The dichotomies inherent in the human mind are multiple," he said. "The problem of command, for instance, highly pertinent in this case. Command is a balance between positive and negative energies—an equilibrium of the forces generated by each of these energies. The proof?"

He turned to Kirk. "Your negative energy was removed from you by that duplication process. Thus, the power of command has begun to fail you. Things remaining as they are, how long can you continue to function as Captain of this ship? Finally unable to decide anything at all, will you…"

McCoy broke in. "Jim, give him a command! Tell him to get lost!"

"If I seem emotionally insensitive to the agony of your ordeal, Captain, please understand. It's the way I am."

"That's for damned sure!" yelled McCoy.

"Gentlemen," Kirk said. In the end, always in the end, one's pain remained a private matter. The scene, however dismal, was always enacted alone. He smiled wryly at them. "I may be losing my ability to command but it hasn't entirely disappeared. Until it does, you will both kindly knock it off."

The intercom on McCoy's desk whirred. Kirk flicked it on. "Kirk here."

"Engineering, sir. We've just located that new trouble with the Transporter. Its Ionizer Unit has been mangled. Looks as if a phaser beam had hit it."

The double's phaser beam had hit it, the double, that separated part of himself. If his crewmen died their lonely death on the subarctic planet beneath him, it would be he, Kirk, their trusted Captain who had killed them.

He got up to walk to the door. "If I'm needed," he said, "I'll be in the Briefing Room."

They had lit a fire down on the planet. Black night was spreading toward them from its horizon. And the stealthy fronds of frost were creeping over the rocks of the rock shelter where the abandoned crewmen huddled together for warmth. Sum, his lips cracked and sore, had to hold his hands over the fire before his fingers could manipulate his communicator. "Can you give us a status report, *Enterprise*? It's fallen to 90 degrees below zero down here."

"This is the Captain, Mr Sura. We have located the trouble. It shouldn't be much longer."

"Think you could rig up a cord, sir, and lower us down a pot of coffee?"

"I'll see what I can do about that," Kirk said.

"Rice wine will do, sir, if you're short of coffee."

"I'll check the commissariat for rice wine, Mr Sulu." And once more it had to be "Kirk out."

He watched his hand reach out to the intercom button. He was afraid to call Scott. He pressed the button. "That mangled unit, Scotty. Status report."

"Nothing much of it left, sir."

"How bad is it?"

"We can't repair it in less than a week."

A week. One hundred and sixty-eight hours. Death by cold was said to be preceded by sleep. Alone in the Briefing Room, Kirk realized that imagination had become his mortal enemy. It showed him the planet's surface under the deadly grip of its incredible cold, its night ominous with the coming sleep of death as the blood in his men's veins turned to ice. They'd be moving slowly now if they could move at all…

Reality endorsed imagination. Sulu was slowed to a crawl as he elbowed himself to the dying warmth to check his phaser. He fired it at another boulder. It burst into glow. The others inched toward it; and Sulu made his frost-blackened lips say, "That rice wine is taking too long. I'm giving Room Service another call."

Nobody spoke as he opened his communicator. "*Enterprise*, this is Sulu."

"Kirk here, Mr Sulu."

"Hot line direct to the Captain again. Are we that far gone, sir?"

Kirk struck the Briefing Room table with his fist "Everybody but you's got the afternoon off. I'm watching the store. How is it down there?"

"Lovely," Sulu said. "We're using our phasers to heat the rocks. One phaser's quit on us. Three are still operational. Any chance of getting us aboard before the skiing season opens down here?"

The ice—maybe it would be merciful, quick. *Think*. But he couldn't think. His thoughts like comets that would not be stayed flashed through his mind—and were gone…

He felt no surprise to see Spock quietly lift the speaker he had dropped.

"This is Spock, Mr Sulu. You will hold out a little longer. *Hold out*. Survival procedures, Mr Sulu."

"As per your training program, Mr Spock."

"Yes, Mr Sulu."

Kirk reached for the speaker. "Sulu—just don't drift, don't lose—awareness. Sulu, beware of sleep…"

As Spock said, "Spock out," Kirk felt an irresistible impulse to return to Sickbay. He wasn't entirely composed of that atavism that had destroyed the Ionizer Unit. He was Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*, too—and he was going back to Sickbay. Courage was doing what you were afraid to do.

The consciousness that had come back to the double was a thing of howling panic. It was thrusting madly against the net of cords that held it, the force of its screams swelling the veins of its

neck. As he watched the writhing body on the bed, it seemed to Kirk that he could taste the acid of its frenzy in his mouth. How he knew what he knew he didn't know; but he knew that the double was feeling some ultimate terror it had met in the black labyrinth of its Cain fate.

"It should be calming down," McCoy said, laying a hypodermic aside. "This tranquilizer should be working now." He threw a worried glance at the body function panel. All its readings showed a dangerous peak.

The tormented body on the bed strained again at its bonds. A shudder shook it. Then, suddenly, it collapsed, its head lolling like a broken doll's.

"What's happened?" Kirk cried. The readings on the body-function panel were rapidly falling.

"The tranquilizer was a mistake," McCoy said. "Its system has rejected it."

"He's *not—dying?*" Kirk said.

McCoy spoke tonelessly. "Yes, it is."

"No," Kirk whispered. "No." He reached for McCoy's arm. "I can't survive without him and he can't survive without me."

McCoy shook his head; and the double moaned. "Afraid, afraid," it said.

Kirk went to it. "Help me," it wept. "I am afraid—so afraid."

Kirk took its hand. McCoy started forward. "Jim, you'd better not…"

Kirk stooped over the bed. "Don't be afraid. This is my hand. Feel it. Hold on to it. That's it. Hang on to my hand. I won't let you go."

"Afraid," whimpered the double pitifully.

Some strength rose up from unknown depths in Kirk. It was as though he had lived through just such a scene before. The words that came to him seemed familiar. "You must hold on to me because we've been pulled apart. Come back! No, you're letting go! Hold on to me. Tight! Tighter!"

He lifted the sheet to wipe the sweat from its forehead. "I'm pulling you back to me. We need each other! That's it. *Tight!* We have to hang on—together…"

McCoy, at the body-function panel, looked around, astounded. But all Kirk saw were the tragic eyes fixed on his in abject dependence. "No fear," he said. "You can come back. You are not

afraid. *You are not afraid*. Be back with me. Be back, be back, be back…"

McCoy touched his shoulder. "Jim, it *is* back."

Kirk stumbled over to McCoy's desk, slumping into its chair. "Now you can use some brandy," McCoy said.

He gagged on the drink. Eyes shut, he said, "I must take him back—into myself. I don't want to, Bones—a brutish, mindless wolf in human shape. But I must. He is me, *me!*"

"Jim, don't take this so hard," McCoy said. "We are all part wolf and part lamb. We need both parts. Compassion is reconciliation between them. It is human to be both lamb and wolf."

"Human?" Kirk asked bitterly.

"Yes, *human*. Some of his wolfishness makes you the man you are. God forbid that I should ever agree with Spock—but he was right! Without the strength of the wolf in you, you could not command this ship! And without the lamb in you, your discipline would be harsh and cruel. Jim, you just used the lamb to give life back to that dying wolf…"

The double was listening, concentrated.

The intercom buzzed. Drained, Kirk said, "Kirk here."

"Spock, sir. Will you come to the Transporter Room? We think we may have found an answer."

"I'm on my way," Kirk said. He turned to McCoy. "Thanks, Bones. And keep your fingers crossed."

"Tell Mr Spock I'm shaking all my rattles to invoke good spirits."

But as the door closed behind Kirk, there came a cry from the bed. "No!" The startled McCoy went to the bed. The double was sitting up. It said quietly, "No. *Everything is under control right now*."

In the Transporter Room, Wilson was holding the mild doglike creature.

"What's that answer you think you've found?" Kirk asked.

"A way to make the Transporter safe, sir," Scott said. "We have attached some temporary bypass and leader circuits to compensate for the velocity variation. There shouldn't be more than a five point difference in speed balance."

"Our suggestion is that we send the two animals through the Transporter," Spock said.

So that was the answer—hope that amendment in the Transporter would somehow rejoin the two halves of the animal as it had somehow cut them apart. It was hoped that his dying men could be beamed home to the *Enterprise* without risk of the fatal division. Hope. Well, without it, you couldn't live.

"All right," Kirk said. "Go ahead."

Spock took the hypodermic from the top of the Transporter console. He nodded at Scott. The Chief Engineer went to the specimen case and lifted its lid. "I'll grab it by the scruff of its neck and hold it as still as I can." He reached into the case. The snarling beast twisted and writhed against Scott's grip on its neck.

"Don't hurt it!" Kirk cried.

Injecting the shot, Spock said, "It's painless, Captain, quick. The animal will lose consciousness for only the few, necessary moments." The snarls subsided. Spock took the creature from Scott and carried it to the Transporter platform where Wilson was waiting with the other one. They laid them on the platform, side by side. Scott, at the console, said, "If this doesn't work—" He broke off at Spock's signal. He turned a dial. The platform flared into glow. The two animals vanished and the glow faded.

"Energize to reverse," Spock said.

Scott twisted a dial. The platform flared into light again. The two animals reappeared—and the light dimmed.

Spock ran to the console. He made some adjustment of dials. "Again," he said to Scott. The process was repeated. The energizing dial was reversed. The platform broke into dazzle. As it shaped itself into substance, McCoy came in.

One animal lay on the platform.

"It's dead," Kirk said.

"Not so fast, Jim," McCoy said.

Kirk waited while he checked the limp body for heartbeat. There was none. Into the silence Spock said, "The shock—the shock of reabsorption…"

Kirk stumbled out of the Transporter Room.

Later, in Sickbay, McCoy gave tentative support to Spock's diagnosis of the cause of the death. Straightening up from the table that held the dead beast, he said, "Maybe it was the shock of reabsorption that killed it. But it would take a post mortem before we could even approach certainty."

"Why shock?" Kirk asked.

"We're only guessing, Jim."

"Yes, I know. But you've both used the word shock."

"The consequence of instinctive fear," Spock said. "The animal lacked the ability to understand the process of reabsorption. Its fear was so great it induced shock. Other conditions that cause shock are not apparent." He was carefully examining the creature. "You yourself can see, sir, that the body is quite undamaged."

Kirk was groping for some answer of his own. "He—in that bed in there—felt great fear." He turned to McCoy. "You saw him feel it. But he survived it. He *survived* it!"

"Just by a hairsbreadth," McCoy reminded him. "I can hear it coming, Jim. You want to take this double of yours through the Transporter with you—you and it, *with* it. No, Jim, *no!*"

"Four of my men are freezing to death," Kirk said.

"But there isn't one genuine shred of evidence to prove this animal died of fear! Shock? Yes. But fear? That's mere theory!"

"Based on the laws of probability," Spock said.

"Probability be hanged!" McCoy shouted. "It's Jim's life that's at stake! And all of a sudden you're an expert on fear! That's a base emotion, Mr Spock. What do you know about it?"

"I must remind you, Doctor, that I am half human," Spock said. "I am more aware than you of what it means to live with a divided spirit—of the suffering involved in possession of two separate selves. I survive it daily."

"That may be—but a piece of machinery is the problem. What do the laws of probability say about the Transporter? Is it reliable? You don't know! It's just more theory, more hopeful guesswork!"

Kirk said, "I am going through the Transporter with him."

McCoy threw up his arms in a gesture of hopelessness. "You've got more guts than brains, Jim! Use your head, for God's sake!"

"I'm getting my four men back on this ship," Kirk. said. "And we can't risk using that Transporter until we know whether this animal died of fear—or mechanical malfunction in the Transporter."

"I want to save the men, too, Jim! But you're more vital to this ship than four crew members. That's the . brutal truth—and you know it!"

Listening, Kirk felt his weakened will sink to its final depth of hesitation. "I have to—try. I must be allowed to try. If I don't try, their death is sure. So will mine be. I shall look alive, Bones. But I shall live as a half man. What good to this ship is a half man Captain?

"Jim, do me one favor. Before you decide, let me run an autopsy on this animal."

"Delay is too expensive," Kirk said.

"At least give Spock more time to test the Transporter. And let me get the lab started on the autopsy." McCoy gathered up the dead animal in a sheet. "Wait, Jim, please wait." He hurried out of Sickbay.

Spock said, "I'll put the Transporter through another checkout cycle as soon as the Doctor returns."

Kirk whirled on him. "I don't need nursemaids, Mr Spock!"

"As soon as the Doctor returns." The six words too many, Spock thought. The weakened will had finally steeled itself to decision only to meet doubt, argument, pressure. Those last six words had been a mistake.

"If you will excuse me, Captain," he said.

Kirk nodded. He watched Spock go. Half human, Spock—but you never came to the end of his aware humanity. Gratitude heartened him to do what he had to do. He was turning toward Sickbay's bed section when Sulu's voice sounded from the wall speaker.

"Kirk here, Mr Sulu."

The voice was a whisper. "Captain—the rocks are cold—no phasers left—one of us is unconscious—we can't hold out much longer." The communicator crackled. "Captain—the cold is freezing the communicator—no time left—no time…"

The whisper fell silent. There was another crackle from the dead communicator. Kirk sank down on the double's bed. Four lives at risk on the fatal planet—two lives at risk in the Transporter process. There was no alternative.

The double spoke fearfully. "What are you going to do?"

Kirk didn't answer. He began to untie the cords of the restraining net over the bed. The double reached out and touched the phaser at his belt. "You don't need that," it said. "I'm not going to fight you anymore. What are you going to do?"

"We are going through the Transporter together," Kirk said.

The double tensed. Then it controlled itself. "If that's what you want," it said.

"It's what I have to want," Kirk said. He untied the last cord, stepped back and raised his phaser. Staggering, the double got up. Then it leaned back against the bed for support. "I feel so weak," it said. "I'll be glad when this is over."

"Let's go," Kirk said.

The double moved toward the door; but on its first step it faltered, groaning. It tried again, staggered again—and Kirk instinctively reached out to help it. It saw its chance. Lunging, it drove its shoulder into Kirk, knocking him backward. The phaser dropped. It stooped for it. Recovering his balance, Kirk shouted, "No, no, you can't…"

The phaser butt crashed into the side of his head. He fell back on the bed. The double paused to finger the scratches on its face. McCoy's medication covered them. It smiled to itself. Then it began to strap Kirk into the bed. "I'm *you*," it told him.

Swaggering, it walked out into the corridor. At its end the elevator door slid open. Janice Rand was standing inside it. At once it tempered its swagger to a quiet walk.

"How are you, Yeoman Rand?"

"Captain," the girl said nervously.

It smiled at her. "Is that a question? No, I am not the impostor. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"Good."

Maybe it was her opportunity, Janice thought. She'd done this man a grave injustice. "Captain," she said, "I've wanted to apologize. If I caused you…"

She got Kirk's own grin. "That's a big word—'if.' I understand, Yeoman. I hope you do. I owe you, I think, a personal explanation."

"No," she said. "It's I who owe you…"

"Let's call it a clarification, then," the double said. "I trust your discretion. There was no impostor, not really. The Transporter malfunctioned. It seems to have created a duplicate of me. It's hard to understand because we haven't yet determined what went wrong. But what we *do* know I'll explain to you later. You're entitled to that. All right?"

Bewildered, she nodded. "All right, sir."

The elevator door opened. Politely, the double stepped back, gesturing her forward. As the elevator; moved on up to the bridge deck, it shouted with laughter. Slamming its hand against the elevator wall, it yelled, "*My* ship! Mine—all mine!"

The sight of Kirk's command chair intoxicated it. As it settled back into it, a frowning Farrell spoke from the navigation console; "No word from Mr Sulu, Captain."

It ignored the comment; and Spock, hurrying over to the command chair, said, "Captain, I couldn't find you in the Transporter Room."

"I changed my mind," the double said. "Take your station, Mr Spock." It didn't look at the Vulcan.

Spock walked slowly back to his computer. It was a very sudden change of mind for a mind that had struggled so valiantly for decision.

"Prepare to leave orbit, Mr Farrell!"

If the order had commanded activation of the Destruct unit, its impact could not have been more devastating. Farrell stared in stark unbelief. The double became abruptly aware that every eye in the bridge was fixed on it.

"Captain—" Farrell began.

"I gave you an order, Mr Farrell."

"I know, sir, but what—what about…?"

"They can't be saved. They're dead now." Its voice rose. "Prepare to leave orbit, Mr Farrell!"

"Yes, sir." Farrell's hand was moving toward a switch when the elevator opened. Kirk and McCoy stepped out of it. There were badly covered scratches on Kirk's face but the hand that held the phaser was steady. The double leaped from the command chair. "There's the impostor," it shouted. "Grab him!"

Nobody moved.

"You are the impostor," McCoy said.

"Don't believe him!" the double shrieked. "Take them both! Grab them!"

Kirk, McCoy beside him, walked on toward the command chair. Spock, reaching out a hand, halted McCoy, shaking his head. McCoy nodded—and Kirk moved on, alone.

"You want me dead, don't you? You want this ship all to yourself! But it's *mine!*"

Farrell had jumped from his chair. Spock touched his shoulder. "This is the Captain's private business," he said.

Kirk maintained his slow advance toward the maddened thing. It backed up, slow step by slow step, screaming.

"I am Captain Kirk, you ship of pigs! All right, let the liar destroy you all! He's already killed four of you! I run this ship! I own it. I own you—all of you!"

Kirk fired his phaser. The double crumpled to the deck, stunned.

"Spock, Bones," he said quietly. "Quickly, please."

Kirk had already taken up his position on the Transporter platform when they laid the unconscious body at his feet.

"You'll have to hold it, Captain," Spock said.

Kirk sat down on the platform. He lifted the drooping head to his shoulder, an arm around the flaccid waist. Then he looked up.

"Mr Spock…"

"Yes, sir."

"If this doesn't work…"

"Understood, sir."

"Jim!" McCoy burst out. "Jim, don't do it! Not yet! In God's name, wait!"

"The console, Mr Spock," Kirk said.

Spock's half-human part had taken him over. This could be goodbye to Kirk. At the console, he bowed his head over his treacherously shaking hands. When he lifted it, his face was calm, impassive.

"I am energizing, sir."

He saw Kirk draw the double closer to him. In the glow that lit the platform, he knew that he was seeing the embrace of an acknowledged, irrevocable brother—hood. Unfaltering, Spock reversed the console's controls. The hum of dematerialization rose. There was dazzle—and silence.

McCoy ran to the platform. Kirk stood on it, alone.

"Jim—Jim?" McCoy cried.

"Hello, Bones," Kirk said. He walked off the empty platform and over to the console. "Mr Spock," he said, "let's get those men of ours up and aboard."

Spock swallowed. "Yes, Captain. At once, sir."

It wasn't done at once. It was twenty minutes before the Transporter platform surrendered its burden of the four bodies to the eager hands awaiting them.

McCoy rose from his last examination. "They'll make it, Jim. Those rocks they heated saved their lives. They're all suffering from severe frostbite—but I think they'll make it."

The pallor of Kirk's face suddenly struck him. "How do *you* feel, Jim?"

There was a new sadness in Kirk's smile. "What's that old expression? 'Sadder but wiser.' I feel sadder, Bones, but much less wise."

“Join the human race, Jim,” McCoy said.

There was a sense of quiet thanksgiving as Kirk entered the bridge. His first move was over to Spock at the computer station. “You know, of course,” he said, “I could never have made it without you.”

“Thank you, Captain. What do you plan to tell the crew?”

“The truth, Mr Spock—that the impostor was put back where he belongs.”

Janice Rand approached him. “I just wanted to say, Captain, how—glad I am that…”

“Thank you, Yeoman.” Kirk returned to his command chair. The girl watched him go. Spock watched the girl.

“That impostor,” he said, “had some very interesting qualities. And he certainly resembled the Captain. You agree, I’m sure, Yeoman Rand.”

She had flushed scarlet. But she met his quizzical eyes with courage. “Yes, Mr Spock. The impostor had some exceedingly interesting qualities.”

THE UNREAL McCOY*

(George Clayton Johnson) **The Man Trap*

The Crater campsite—or the Bierce campsite, as the records called it—on Regulus VIII was the crumbling remains of what might once have been a nested temple, surrounded now by archeological digs, several sheds, and a tumble of tools, tarpaulins, and battered artifacts. Outside the crater proper, the planet was largely barren except for patches of low, thorny vegetation, all the way in any direction to wherever the next crater might be—there were plenty of those, but there'd been no time to investigate them, beyond noting that they had all been inhabited once, unknown millennia ago. There was nothing uncommon about that; the galaxy was strewn with ruins about which nobody knew anything, there were a hundred such planets for every archeologist who could even dream of scratching such a surface. Bierce had just been lucky—fantastically lucky.

All the same, Regulus VIII made Kirk—Capt. James Kirk of the starship *Enterprise,* who had seen more planets than most men knew existed—feel faintly edgy. The *Enterprise* had landed here in conformity to the book; to be specific, to that part of the book which said that research personnel on alien planets must have their health certified by a starship's surgeon at one-year intervals. The *Enterprise* had been in Bierce's vicinity at the statutory time, and Ship's Surgeon McCoy had come down by transporter from the orbiting *Enterprise* to do the job. Utterly, completely routine, except for the fact that McCoy had mentioned that Bierce's wife Nancy had been a serious interest of McCoy's, pre-Bierce, well over ten years ago. And after all, what could be more common place than that?

Then Nancy came out of the temple—if that is what it was—to meet them.

There were only three of them: McCoy and a crewman, Darnell, out of duty, and Kirk, out of curiosity. She came forward with outstretched hands, and after a moment's hesitation, McCoy took them. "Leonard!" she said. "Let me look at you."

"Nancy," McCoy said. "You… you haven't aged a year."

Kirk restrained himself from smiling. Nancy Bierce was handsome, but nothing extraordinary: a strongly built woman of about forty, moderately graceful, her hair tinged with gray. It wasn't easy to believe that the hard-bitten medico could have been so smitten, even at thirty or less, as to be unable to see the signs of aging now. Still, she did have a sweet smile.

"This is the Captain of the *Enterprise,* Jim Kirk," McCoy said. "And this is Crewman Darnell."

Nancy turned her smile on the Captain, and then on the crewman. Darnell's reaction was astonishing. His jaw swung open; he was frankly staring. Kirk would have kicked him had he been within reach.

"Come in, come in," she was saying. "We may have to wait a little for Bob; once he starts digging, he forgets time. We've made up some quarters in what seems to have been an old altar chamber—not luxurious, but lots of room. Come on in, Plum."

She ducked inside the low, crumbling stone door.

"Plum?" Kirk said.

"An old pet name," McCoy said, embarrassed. He followed her. Embarrassed himself at his own gaucherie, Kirk swung on the crewman.

"Just what are you goggling at, Mister?"

"Sorry, sir," Darnell said stiffly. "She reminds me of somebody, is all. A girl I knew once on Wrigley's Planet. That is…"

"That's enough," Kirk said drily. "The next thought of that kind you have will probably be in solitary. Maybe you'd better wait outside."

"Yessir. Thanks." Darnell seemed genuinely grateful. "I'll explore a little, if that suits you, Captain."

"Do that. Just stay within call."

Commonplace; Darnell hadn't seen a strange woman since his last landfall. But most peculiar, too.

Bierce did not arrive, and after apologies, Nancy left again to look for him, leaving Kirk and McCoy to examine the stone room, trying not to speak to each other. Kirk could not decide whether he would rather be back on board the *Enterprise,* or just plain dead; his diplomacy had not failed him this badly in he could not think how many years.

Luckily, Bierce showed up before Kirk had to decide whether to run or suicide. He was an unusually tall man, all knuckles, knees, and cheekbones, wearing faded coveralls. Slightly taller than McCoy, his face was as craggy as his body; the glint in the eyes, Kirk thought, was somehow both intelligent and rather bitter. But then, Kirk had never pretended to understand the academic type.

"Dr Bierce," he said, "I'm Captain Kirk, and this is Ship's Surgeon…"

"I know who you are," Bierce broke in, in a voice with the blaring rasp of a busy signal. "We don't need you here. If you'll just refill us on aspirin, salt tablets, and the like, you needn't trouble yourselves further."

"Sorry, but the law requires an annual checkup," Kirk said. "If you'll co-operate, I'm sure Dr McCoy will be as quick as possible." McCoy, in fact, already had his instruments out.

"McCoy?" Bierce said. "I've heard that name. Ah, yes, Nancy used to talk about you."

"Hands out from your sides, please, and breathe evenly. Yes, didn't she mention I'd arrived?"

After the slightest of pauses, Bierce said, "You've seen Nancy?"

"She was here when we arrived," Kirk said. "She went to look for you."

"Oh. Quite so. I'm pleased, of course, that she can meet an old friend, have a chance of some company. I enjoy solitude, but it's difficult for a woman sometimes."

"I understand," Kirk said, but he was none too sure he did. The sudden attempt at cordiality rang false, somehow, after the preceding hostility. At least *that* had sounded genuine.

McCoy had finished his checkup with the tricorder and produced a tongue depressor with a small flourish. "She hasn't changed a bit," he said. "Open your mouth, please."

Reluctantly, Bierce complied. At the same instant, the air was split by a full-throated shriek of horror. For an insane moment Kirk had the impression that the sound had issued from Bierce's mouth. Then another scream ripped the silence, and Kirk realized that it was, of course, a female voice.

They all three bolted out the door. In the open, Kirk and McCoy outdistanced Bierce quickly; for all his out door life, he was not a good runner. But they hadn't far to go. Just beyond the rim of the crater, Nancy, both fists to her mouth, was standing over the body of Darnell.

As they came pounding up she moved toward McCoy, but he ignored her and dropped beside the body. It was lying on its face. After checking the pulse, McCoy gently turned the head to one side, grunted, and then turned the body over completely.

It was clear even to Kirk that the crewman was dead. His face was covered with small ringlike red blotches, slowly fading. "What hit him?" Kirk said tensely.

"Don't know. Petachiae a little like vacuum mottling, or maybe some sort of immunological… hullo, what's this?"

Bierce came panting up as McCoy slowly forced open one of Darnell's fists. In it was a twisted, scabrous-looking object of no particular color, like a mummified parsnip. It looked also as though part of it had been bitten away. Now *that* was incredible. Kirk swung on Nancy.

"What happened?" he said tersely.

"Don't snap at my wife, Captain," Bierce said in his busy-signal voice. "Plainly it's not her fault!"

"One of my men is dead. I accuse nobody, but Mrs Bierce is the only witness."

McCoy rose and said to Nancy, gently: "Just tell us what you saw, Nancy. Take your time."

"I was just…" she said, and then had to stop and swallow, as if fighting for control. "I couldn't find Bob, and I'd… I'd just started back when I saw your crewman. He had that borgia root in his hand and he was smelling it. I was just going to call out to him when… he bit into it. I had no idea he was going to—and then his face twisted and he fell…"

She broke off and buried her face in her hands. McCoy took her gently by one shoulder. Kirk, feeling no obligation to add one bedside manner more, said evenly: "How'd you know what the root was if you'd just come within calling distance?"

"This cross-examination—" Bierce grated.

"Bob, please. I didn't know, of course. Not until I saw it now. But it's dangerous to handle any plant on a new world."

Certainly true. Equally certainly, it would have been no news to Darnell. His face impassive, Kirk told McCoy: "Pack up, Bones. We can resume the physicals tomorrow."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," Bierce said. "If you'll just disembark our supplies, Captain…"

"It's not going to be that easy, Dr Bierce," Kirk said. He snapped open his communicator. "Kirk to Transporter Room. Lock and

beam: two transportees and a corpse."

The autopsied body of Darnell lay on a table in the sick bay, unrecognizable now even by his mother, if so veteran a spaceman had ever had one. Kirk, standing near a communicator panel, watched with a faint physical uneasiness as McCoy lowered Darnell's brain into a shallow bowl and then turned and washed his hands until they were paper-white. Kirk had seen corpses in every conceivable state of distortion and age in one battle and another, but this clinical bloodiness was not within his experience.

"I can't rule poison out entirely," McCoy said, in a matter-of-fact voice. "Some of the best-known act just as fast and leave just as little trace: botulinus, for example. But there's no trace of any woody substance in his stomach or even between his teeth. All I can say for sure is that he's got massive capillary damage—which could be due to almost anything, even shock—and those marks on his face."

McCoy covered the ruined body. "I'll be running some blood chemistry tests, but I'd like to know what I'm testing for. I'd also like to know what symptoms that 'borgia root' is *supposed* to produce. Until then, Jim, I'm really rather in the dark."

"Spock's running a library search on the plant," Kirk said. "It shouldn't take him long. But I must confess that what you've said thus far doesn't completely surprise me. Darnell was too old a hand to bite into any old thing he happened to pick up."

"Then what's left? Nancy? Jim, I'm not quite trusting my own eyes lately, but Nancy didn't use to be capable of murder—certainly not of an utter stranger, to boot!"

"It's not only people who kill… hold it, here's the report. Go ahead, Mr Spock."

"We have nothing on the borgia root but what the Bierces themselves reported in their project request six years ago," Spock's precise voice said. "There they call it an aconite resembling the *Lilium* family. Said to contain some twenty to fifty different alkaloids, none then identifiable specifically with the equipment to hand. The raw root is poisonous to mice. No mention of any human symptoms. Except…"

"Except what?" McCoy snapped.

"Well, Dr McCoy, this isn't a symptom. The report adds that the root has a pleasant perfume, bland but edible-smelling, rather like tapioca. And that's all there is."

"Thanks." Kirk switched off. "Bones, I can't see Darnell having been driven irresistibly to bite into an unknown plant because it smelled like tapioca. He wouldn't have bitten into something that smelled like a brandied peach unless he'd known its pedigree. He was a seasoned hand."

McCoy spread his hands expressively. "You knew your man, Jim—but where does that leave us? The symptoms do vaguely resemble aconite poisoning. Beyond that, we're nowhere."

"Not quite," Kirk said. "We still have to check on the Bierces, I'm afraid, Bones. And for that I'm still going to need your help."

McCoy turned his back and resumed washing his hands. "You'll get it," he said; but his voice was very cold.

Kirk's method of checking on the Bierces was simple but drastic: he ordered them both on board the ship. Bierce raged.

"If you think you can beam down here, bully us, interfere with my work—considering the inescapable fact that you are a trespasser on my planet…"

"Your complaint is noted," Kirk said. "I apologize for the inconvenience. But it's also an inescapable fact that something we don't understand killed one of our men. It could very well be a danger to you, too."

"We've been here almost five years. If there was something hostile here we'd know about it by now, wouldn't we?"

"Not necessarily," Kirk said. "Two people can't know all the ins and outs of a whole planet, not even in five years—or a lifetime. In any event, one of the missions of the *Enterprise* is to protect human life in places like this. Under the circumstances, I'm going to have to be arbitrary and declare the argument closed."

It was shortly after they came aboard that McCoy forwarded his reports on the analyses of Darnell's body. "It was shock, all right," he told Kirk grimly by vid-screen. "But shock of a most peculiar sort. His blood electrolytes were completely deranged: massive salt depletion, hell—there isn't a microgram of salt in his whole body. Not in the blood, the tears, the organs, not anywhere. I can't even begin to guess how that could have happened at all, let alone all at once."

"What about the mottling on his face?"

"Broken capillaries. There are such marks all over the body. They're normal under the circumstances—except that I can't explain why they should be most marked on the face, or why the

mottling should be ring-shaped. Clearly, though, he wasn't poisoned."

"Then the bitten plant," Kirk said equally grimly, "was a plant—in the criminal, not the botanical sense. A blind. That implies intelligence. I can't say I like that any better."

"Nor I," McCoy said. His eyes were averted.

"All right. That means we'll have to waste no time grilling the Bierces. I'll take it on. Bones, this has been a tremendous strain on you, I know, and you've been without sleep for two days. Better take a couple of tranquilizers and doss down."

"I'm all right."

"Orders," Kirk said. He turned off the screen and set off for the quarters he had assigned the Bierces.

But there was only one Bierce there. Nancy was missing.

"I expect she's gone below," Bierce said indifferently. "I'd go myself if I could get access to your Transporter for ten seconds. We didn't ask to be imprisoned up here."

"Darnell didn't ask to be killed, either. Your wife may be in serious danger. I must say, you seem singularly unworried."

"She's in no danger. This menace is all in your imagination."

"I suppose the body is imaginary, too?"

Bierce shrugged. "Nobody knows what could have killed him. For all I know, you brought your own menace with you."

There was nothing further to be got out of him. Exasperated, Kirk went back to the bridge and ordered a general search. The results were all negative—including the report from the Transporter Room, which insisted that nobody had used its facilities since the party had returned to the ship from the camp.

But the search, though it did not find Nancy, found something else: Crewman Barnhart, dead on Deck Twelve. The marks on his body were the same as those on Darnell's.

Baffled and furious, Kirk called McCoy. "I'm sorry to bust in on your sleep, Bones, but this has gone far enough. I want Bierce checked out under pentathol."

"Um," McCoy said. His voice sounded fuzzy, as though he had still not quite recovered from his tranquilizer dose. "Pentathol. Truth dope. Narcosynthesis. Um. Takes time. What about the patient's civil rights?"

"He can file a complaint if he wants. Go and get him ready."

An hour later, Bierce was lying on his bunk in half-trance. Kirk bent over him tensely; McCoy and Spock hovered in the background.

"Where's your wife?"

"Don't know… Poor Nancy, I loved her… The last of its kind…"

"Explain, please."

"The passenger pigeon… the buffalo…" Bierce groaned. "I feel strange."

Kirk beckoned to McCoy, who checked Bierce's pulse and looked under his eyelids. "He's all right," he said. "The transfer of questioner, from me to you, upset him. He's recovering."

"What about buffalo?" Kirk said, feeling absurd.

"Millions of them… prairies black with them. One single herd that covered three states. When they moved… like thunder. All gone now. Like the creatures here."

"Here? You mean down on the planet?"

"On the planet. Their temples… great poetry… Millions of them once, and now only one left. Nancy understood."

"Always the past tense," Spock's voice murmured.

"Where is Nancy? Where is she *now?*"

"Dead. Buried up on the hill. It killed her."

"Buried! But… how long ago was this, anyhow?"

"A year," Bierce said. "Or was it two? I don't know. So confusing, Nancy and not Nancy. They needed salt, you see. When it ran out, they died, all but one."

The implication stunned Kirk. It was Spock who put the question.

"Is this creature masquerading as your wife?"

"Not a masquerade," Bierce droned. "It can *be* Nancy."

"Or anybody else?"

"Anybody. When it killed Nancy, I almost destroyed it. But I couldn't. It was the last."

The repetition was becoming more irritating every minute. Kirk said stonily: "Is that the only reason, Bierce? Tell me this: When it's with you, is it always Nancy?"

Bierce writhed. There was no answer. McCoy came forward again.

"I wouldn't press that one if I were you, Jim," he said. "You can get the answer if you need it, but not without endangering the patient."

"I don't need any better answer," Kirk said. "So we've intruded here into a little private heaven. The thing can be wife, lover, best friend, idol, slave, wise man, fool—anybody. A great life, having everyone in the universe at your beck and call—and you win all the arguments."

"A one-way road to paranoia," Spock said. Kirk swung back to the drugged man.

"Then can you recognize the creature—no matter what form it takes?"

"Yes…"

"Will you help us?"

"No,"

Kirk had expected no more. He gestured to McCoy. "I've got to go organize a search. Break down that resistance, Bones, I don't care how you do it or how much you endanger Bierce. In his present state of mind he's as big a danger to us as his 'wife.' Spock, back him up, and be ready to shoot if he should turn violent."

He stalked out. On the bridge, he called a General Quarters Three; that would put pairs of armed men in every corridor, on every deck. "Every man inspect his mate closely," he told the intercom. "There's one extra person aboard, masquerading as one of us. Lieutenant Uhura, make television rounds of all posts and stations. If you see any person twice in different places, sound the alarm. Got it?"

A sound behind him made him swing around. It was Spock. His clothes were torn, and he was breathing heavily.

"Spock! I thought I told you… what happened?"

"It was McCoy," Spock said shakily. "Or rather, it wasn't McCoy. You were barely out of the cabin when it grabbed me. I got away, but it's got my sidearm. No telling where it's off to now."

"McCoy! I *thought* he seemed a little reluctant about the pentathol. Reluctant, and sort of searching his memory, too. No wonder. Well, there's only one place it can have gone to now: right back where it came from."

"The planet? It can't."

"No. McCoy's cabin." He started to get up, but Spock lifted a hand sharply.

"Better look first, Captain. It may not have killed him yet, and if we alarm it…"

"You're right." Quickly, Kirk dialed in the intercom to McCoy's cabin, and after only a slight hesitation, punched the override button which would give him vision without sounding the buzzer on the other end.

McCoy was there. He was there twice: a sleeping McCoy on the bunk, and another one standing just inside the closed doorway, looking across the room. The standing form moved, passing in front of the hidden camera and momentarily blocking the view. Then it came back into the frame—but no longer as McCoy. It was Nancy.

She sat down on the bed and shook the sleeping doctor. He muttered, but refused to wake.

"Leonard," Nancy's voice said. "It's me. Nancy. Wake up. Please wake up. Help me."

Kirk had to admire the performance. What he was seeing was no doubt an alien creature, but its terror was completely convincing. Quite possibly it *was* in terror; in any event, the human form conveyed it as directly as a blow.

She shook McCoy again. He blinked his eyes groggily, and then sat up.

"Nancy! What's this? How long have I been sleeping?"

"Help me, Leonard."

"What's wrong? You're frightened."

"I am, I am," she said. "Please help me. They want to kill me!"

"Who?" McCoy said. "Easy. Nobody's going to hurt you."

"That's enough," Kirk said, unconsciously lowering his voice, though the couple on the screen could not hear him. "Luckily, the thing's trying to persuade him of something instead of killing him. Let's get down there fast, before it changes its mind."

Moments later, they burst into McCoy's cabin. The surgeon and the girl swung toward them. "Nancy" cried out.

"Get away from her, Bones," Kirk said, holding his gun rock steady.

"What? What's going on here, Jim?"

"That isn't Nancy, Bones."

"It isn't? Of course it is. Are you off your rocker?"

"It killed two crewmen."

"Bierce, too," Spock put in, his own gun leveled.

"*It?*"

"It," Kirk said. "Let me show you."

Kirk held out his free hand, unclenching it slowly. In the palm was a little heap of white crystals, diminishing at the edges from perspiration. "Look, Nancy," he said. "Salt. Free for the taking. Pure, concentrated salt."

Nancy took a hesitant step toward him, then stopped.

"Leonard," she said in a low voice. "Send him away. If you love me, make him go away."

"By all means," McCoy said harshly. "This is crazy behavior, Jim. You're frightening her."

"Not fright," Kirk said. "Hunger. Look at her!"

The creature, as if hypnotized, took another step forward. Then, without the slightest warning, there was a hurricane of motion. Kirk had a brief impression of a blocky body, man-sized but not the least like a man, and of suction-cup tentacles reaching for his face. Then there was a blast of sound and he fell.

It took a while for both Kirk and McCoy to recover—the captain from the nimbus of Spock's close-range phaser bolt, McCoy from emotional shock. By the time they were all back on the bridge, Bierce's planet was receding.

"The salt was an inspiration," Spock said. "Evidently the creature only hunted when it couldn't get the pure stuff; that's how Bierce kept it in control."

"I don't think the salt supply was the only reason why the race died out, though," Kirk said. "It wasn't really very intelligent—didn't use its advantages nearly as well as it might have."

"They could well have been residual," Spock suggested. "We still have teeth and nails, but we don't bite and claw much these days."

"That could well be. There's one thing I don't understand, though. How did it get into your cabin in the first place, Bones? Or don't you want to talk about it?"

"I don't mind," McCoy said. "Though I do feel like six kinds of a fool. It was simple. She came in just after I'd taken the tranquilizer and was feeling a little afloat. She said she didn't love her husband any more—wanted me to take her back to Earth. Well… it was a real thing I had with Nancy, long ago. I wasn't hard to tempt, especially with the drug already in my system. And later on, while

I was asleep, she must have given me another dose—otherwise I couldn't have slept through all the excitement, the general quarters call and so on.

It just goes to prove all over again… never mess with civilians."

"A good principle," Kirk agreed. "Unfortunately, an impossible one to live by."

"There's something *I* don't understand, though," McCoy added. "The creature and Bierce had Spock all alone in Bierce's cabin—and from what I've found during the dissection, it was twice as strong as a man anyhow. How did you get out, Mr Spock, without losing anything but your gun?"

Spock smiled. "Fortunately, my ancestors spawned in quite another ocean than yours, Dr McCoy," he said. "My blood salts are quite different from yours. Evidently, I wasn't appetizing enough."

"Of course," McCoy said. He looked over at Kirk. "You still look a little pensive, Jim. Is there still something else wrong?"

"Mmm?" Kirk said. "Wrong? No, not exactly. I was just thinking about the buffalo."

THE NAKED TIME

(John D. F. Black)

Nobody, it was clear, was going to miss the planet when it did break up. Nobody had even bothered to name it; on the charts it was just ULAPG42821DB, a coding promptly shorted by some of the *Enterprise's* junior officers to "La Pig."

It was not an especially appropriate nickname. The planet, a rockball about 10,000 miles in diameter, was a frozen, windless wilderness, without so much as a gnarled root or fragment of lichen to relieve the monotony from horizon to purple horizon. But in one way the name fitted: the empty world was too big for its class.

After a relatively short lifetime of a few hundred million years, stresses between its frozen surface and its shrinking core were about to shatter it.

There was an observation station on La Pig, manned by six people. These would have to be got off, and the *Enterprise,* being in the vicinity, got the job. After that, the orders ran, the starship was to hang around and observe the breakup. The data collected would be of great interest to the sliderule boys back on Earth. Maybe someday they would turn the figures into a way to break up a planet at will, people and all.

Captain Kirk, like most line officers, did not have a high opinion of the chairborne arms of his service.

It turned out, however, that there was nobody at all to pick up off La Pig. The observation station was wide open, and the ice had moved inside. Massive coatings of it lay over everything—floors, consoles, even chairs. The doors were frozen open, and all the power was off.

The six members of the station complement were dead. One, in heavy gear, lay bent half over one of the consoles. On the floor at the entrance to one of the corridors was the body of a woman, very lightly clad and more than half iced over. Inspection, however, showed that she had been dead before the cold had got to her; she had been strangled.

In the lower part of the station were the other four. The engineer sat at his post with all the life-support system switches set at OFF, frozen there as though he hadn't given a damn. There was still plenty of power available; he just hadn't wanted it on any more. Two of the others were dead in their beds, which was absolutely normal and expectable considering the temperature. But the sixth and last man had died while taking a shower—fully clothed.

"There wasn't anything else to be seen," Mr Spock, the officer in charge of the transporter party, later told Captain Kirk. "Except that there were little puddles of water here and there that hadn't frozen, though at that temperature they certainly should have, no matter what they might have held in solution. We brought back a small sample for the lab. The bodies are in our morgue now, still frozen. As for the people, I think maybe this is a job for a playwright, not an official investigation."

"Imagination's a useful talent in a police officer," Kirk commented. "At a venture, I'd guess that something volatile and highly toxic got loose in the station. One of the men got splattered and rushed to the shower hoping to sluice if off, clothes and all. Somebody else opened all the exit ports in an attempt to let the stuff blow out into the outside atmosphere."

"And the strangled woman?"

"Somebody blamed her for the initial accident—which was maybe just the last of a long chain of carelessnesses, and maybe irritating behavior too, on her part. You know how tempers can get frayed in small isolated crews like this."

"Very good, Captain," Spock said. "Now what about the engineer shutting off the life systems?"

Kirk threw up his hands. "I give up. Maybe he saw that nothing was going to work and decided on suicide. Or more likely I'm completely wrong all down the line. We'd better settle in our observation orbit. Whatever happened down there, apparently the books are closed."

For the record, it was just as well that he said "apparently."

Joe Tormolen, the crewman who had accompanied Mr Spock to the observation station, was the first to show the signs. He had been eating all by himself in the recreation room—not unusual in itself, for though efficient and reliable, Joe was not very sociable. Nearby, Sulu, the chief pilot, and Navigator Kevin Riley were having an argument over the merits of fencing as exercise, with Sulu of course holding the affirmative. At some point in the discussion, Sulu appealed to Joe for support.

For answer, Joe flew into a white fury, babbling disconnectedly but under high pressure about the six people who had died on La Pig, and the unworthiness of human beings in general to be in space at all. At the height of this frenzied oration, Joe attempted to turn a steak knife on himself.

The resulting struggle was protracted, and because Sulu and Riley naturally misread Joe's intentions—they thought he was going to attack one of them with the knife—Joe succeeded in wounding himself badly. All three were bloodsmeared by the time he was subdued and hauled off to sick bay; at first arrival, the security guards couldn't guess which of the three scuffling figures was the hurt one.

There was no time to discuss the case in any detail; La Pig was already beginning to break up, and Sulu and Riley were needed on the bridge as soon as they could wash up. As the breakup proceeded, the planet's effective mass would change, and perhaps even its center of gravity—accompanied by steady, growing distortion of its extensive magnetic field—so that what had been a stable parking orbit for the *Enterprise* at one moment would become unstable and fragment-strewn the next. The changes were nothing the computer could predict except in rather general orders of magnitude; human brains had to watch and compensate, constantly.

Dr McCoy's report that Joe Tormolen had died consequently did not reach Kirk for twenty-four hours, and it was another four before he could answer McCoy's request for a consultation. By then, however, the break-up process seemed to have reached some sort of inflection point, where it would simply pause for an hour or so; he could leave the vigil to Sulu and Riley for a short visit to McCoy's office.

"I wouldn't have called you if Joe hadn't been one of the two men down on La Pig," McCoy said directly. "But the case is odd and I don't want to overlook the possibility that there's some connection."

"What's odd about it?"

"Well," McCoy said, "the suicide attempt itself was odd. Joe's self-doubt quotient always rated high, and he was rather a brooding, introspective type; but I'm puzzled about what could have brought it to the surface this suddenly and with this much force.

"And Jim, he shouldn't have died. He had intestinal damage, but I closed it all up neatly and cleaned out the peritoneum; there was

no secondary infection. He died anyhow, and I don't know of what."

"Maybe he just gave up," Kirk suggested.

"I've seen that happen. But I can't put it on a death certificate. I have to have a proximate cause, like toxemia or a clot in the brain. Joe just seemed to have a generalized circulatory failure, from no proximate cause at all. And those six dead people on La Pig are not reassuring."

"True enough. What about that sample Spock brought back?"

McCoy shrugged. "Anything's possible, I suppose—but as far as we can tell, that stuff's just water, with some trace minerals that lower its freezing point a good deal. We're handling it with every possible precaution, it's bacteriologically clean—which means no viruses, either—and very nearly chemically pure. I've about concluded that it's a blind alley, though of course I'm still trying to think of new checks to run on it; we all are."

"Well, I'll keep an eye on Spock," Kirk said. "He was the only other man who was down there—though his metabolism's so different that I don't know what I'll be looking for. And in the meantime, we'll just have to hope it was a coincidence."

He went out. As he turned from the door, he was startled to see Sulu coming down a side corridor, not yet aware of Kirk. Evidently he had just come from the gym, for his velour shirt was off, revealing a black tee-shirt, and he had a towel around his neck. He was carrying a fencing foil with a tip protector on it under his arm, and he looked quite pleased with himself—certainly nothing like a man who was away from his post in an alert.

He swung the foil so that it pointed to the ceiling, then let it slip down between his hands so that the capped end was directly before his face. After a moment's study, he took the cap off. Then he took the weapon by the hilt and tested its heft. "Sulu!"

The pilot jumped back and hit lightly in the guard position. The point of the foil described small circles in the air between the two men.

"Aha!" Sulu said, almost gleefully. "Queen's guard or Richelieu's man? Declare yourself!"

"Sulu, what's this? You're supposed to be on station."

Sulu advanced one pace with the crab-step of the fencer.

"You think to outwit me, eh? Unsheathe your weapon!"

"That's enough," Kirk said sharply. "Report yourself to sick bay."

"And leave you the bois? Nay, rather…"

He made a sudden lunge, kirk jumped back and snatched out his phaser, setting it to "stun" with his thumb in the same motion, but Sulu was too quick for him. He leapt for a recess in the wall where there was an access ladder to the 'tween-hulls catwalks, and vanished up it. From the vacated manhole his voice echoed back: "Cowarrrrrnrrrrrd!"

Kirk made the bridge on the double. As he entered, Uhura was giving up the navigator's position to another crewman and moving back to her communications console. There was already another substitute in Sulu's chair. Kirk said, "Where's Riley?"

"Apparently he just wandered off," Spock said, surrendering the command chair to Kirk in his turn. "Nobody but Yeoman Harris here saw him go."

"Symptoms?" Kirk asked the helmsman.

"He wasn't violent or anything, sir. I asked where Mr Sulu was and he began to sing, 'Have no fear, Riley's here.' Then he said he was sorry for me that I wasn't an Irishman—in fact I am, sir—and said he was going for a turn on the battlements."

"Sulu's got it too," Kirk said briefly. "Chased me with a sword on level two, corridor three, then bolted between the hulls. Lieutenant Uhura, tell Security to locate and confine them both. I want every crewman who comes in contact with them medically checked."

"Psychiatrically, I would suggest, Captain," Spock said.

"Explain."

"This siezure, whatever it is, seems to force buried self-images to the surface. Tormolen was a depressive; it drove him down to the bottom of his cycle and below it, so he suicided. Riley fancies himself a descendant of his Irish kings. Sulu at heart is an eighteenth-century swash buckler."

"All right. What's the present condition of the planet?"

"Breaking faster than predicted," Spock said. "As of now we've got a 2 per cent fall increment."

"Stabilize." He turned to his own command board, but the helmsman's voice jerked his attention back.

"Sir, the helm doesn't answer."

"Fire all ventral verniers then. We'll rectify orbit later."

The helmsman hit the switch. Nothing happened.

"Verniers also dead, sir."

"Main engines: warp one!" Kirk rasped.

"That'll throw us right out of the system," Spock observed, as if only stating a mild inconvenience.

"Can't help that."

"No response, sir," the helmsman said.

"Engine room, acknowledge!" Spock said into the intercom. "Give us power. Our controls are dead."

Kirk jerked a thumb at the elevator. "Mr Spock, find out what's going on down there."

Spock started to move, but at the same time the elevator door slid aside, and Sulu was advancing, foil in hand. "Richelieu!" he said. "At last!"

"Sulu," Kirk said, "put down that damned…"

"For honor, Queen and France!" Sulu lunged directly at Spock, who in sheer unbelief almost let himself be run through. Kirk tried to move in but the needlepoint flicked promptly in his direction. "Now, foul Richelieu…"

He was about to lunge when he saw Uhura trying to circle behind him. He spun; she halted.

"Aha, fair maiden!"

"Sorry, neither," Uhura said. She threw a glance deliberately over Sulu's left shoulder; as he jerked in that direction, Spock's hand caught him on the right shoulder with the Vulcanian nerve pinch. Sulu went down on the deck like a sack of flour.

Forgetting his existence instantly, Kirk whirled on the intercom. "Mr Scott! We need power! Scott! Engine room, acknowledge!"

In a musical tenor, the intercom said indolently: "You rang?"

"Riley?" Kirk said, trying to repress his fury.

"This is Capt. Kevin Thomas Riley of the Starship *Enterprise.* And who would I have the honor of speakin' to?"

"This is Kirk, dammit."

"Kirk who? Sure and I've got no such officer."

"Riley, this is Captain Kirk. Get out of the engine room, Navigator. Where's Scott?"

"Now hear this, cooks," Riley said. "This is your captain and I'll be wantin' double portions of ice cream for the crew. Captain's compliments, in honor of St. Kevin's Day. And now, your Captain will render an appropriate selection."

Kirk bolted for the elevator. Spock moved automatically to the command chair. "Sir," he said, "at our present rate of descent we have less than twenty minutes before we enter the planet's exosphere."

"All right," Kirk said grimly. "I'll see what I can do about that monkey. Stand by to apply power the instant you get it."

The elevator doors closed on him. Throughout the ship, Riley's voice began to bawl: "I'll take you home again, Kathleen." He was no singer.

It would have been funny, had it not been for the fact that the serenade had the intercom system completely tied up; that the seizure, judging by Joe Tormolen, was followed by a reasonless death; and that the *Enterprise* itself was due shortly to become just another battered lump in a whirling, planet-sized mass of cosmic rubble.

Scott and two crewmen were outside the engine room door, running a sensor around its edge, as Kirk arrived. Scott looked quickly at the Captain, and then back at the job.

"Trying to get this open, sir," he said. "Riley ran in, said you wanted us on the bridge, then locked us out. We heard you talking to him on the intercom."

"He's cut off both helm and power," Kirk said. "Can you by-pass him and work from the auxiliary?"

"No, Captain, he's hooked everything through the main panel in there." Scott prodded one of the crewmen. "Get up to my office and pull the plans for this bulkhead here. If we've got to cut, I don't want to go through any circuitry." The crewman nodded and ran.

"Can you give us battery power on the helm, at least?" Kirk said. "It won't check our fall but at least it'll keep us stabilized. We've got maybe nineteen minutes, Scotty."

"I heard. I can try it."

"Good." Kirk started back for the bridge.

"And tears be-dim your loving eyes…"

On the bridge, Kirk snapped, "Can't you cut off that noise?"

"No, sir," Lieutenant Uhura said. "He can override any channel from the main power panels there."

"There's one he can't override," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, seal off all ship sections. If this is a contagion, maybe we can stop it from spreading, and at the same time…"

"I follow you," Spock said. He activated the servos for the sector; bulkheads. Automatically, the main alarm went off, drowning Riley out completely. When it quit, there was a brief

silence. Then Riley's voice said: "Lieutenant Uhura, this is Captain Riley. You interrupted my song. That was petty of you. No ice cream for you."

"Seventeen minutes left, sir," Spock said.

"Attention crew," Riley's voice went on. "There will be a formal dance in the ship's bowling alley at 1900 hours. All personnel will have a ball." There was a skirl of gleeful laughter. "For the occasion all female crewmen will be issued one pint of perfume from ship's stores. All male crewmen will be raised one pay grade to compensate. Stand by for further goodies."

"Any report on Sulu before the intercom got blanketed?" Kirk said.

"Dr McCoy had him in sick bay under heavy tranquilization," Lieutenant Uhura said. "He wasn't any worse then, but all tests were negative… I got the impression that the surgeon had some sort of idea, but he was cut off before he could explain it."

"Well, Riley's the immediate problem now."

A runner came in and saluted. "Sir, Mr Scott's compliments and you have a jump circuit from batteries to helm control now. Mr Scott has resumed cutting into the engine room. He says he should have access in fourteen minutes, sir."

"Which is just the margin we have left," Kirk said. "And it'll take three minutes to tune the engines to full power again. Captain's compliments to Mr Scott and tell him to cut in any old way and not worry about cutting any circuits but major leads."

"Now hear this," Riley's voice said. "In future all female crew members will let their hair hang loosely down over their shoulders and will use restraint in putting on make-up. Repeat, women should not look made up."

"Sir," Spock said in a strained voice.

"One second. I want two security guards to join Mr Scott's party. Riley may be armed."

"I've already done that," Spock said. "Sir…"

"… Across the ocean wide and deep…"

"Sir, I feel ill," Spock said formally. "Request permission to report to sick bay."

Kirk clapped a hand to his forehead. "Symptoms?"

"Just a general malaise, sir. But in view of…"

"Yes, yes. But you can't *get* to sick bay; the sections are all sealed off."

"Request I be locked in my quarters, then, sir. I can reach those."

"Permission granted. Somebody find him a guard." As Spock went out, another dismaying thought struck Kirk. Suppose McCoy had the affliction now, whatever it was? Except for Spock and the now-dead Tormolen, he had been exposed to it longest, and Spock could be supposed to be unusually resistant. "Lieutenant Uhura, you might as well abandon that console, it's doing us no good at the moment. Find yourself a length of telephone cable and an eavesdropper, and go between hulls to the hull above the sick bay. You'll be able to hear McCoy but not talk back; get his attention, and answer him, by prisoners' raps. Relay the conversation to me by pocket transmitter. Mark and move"

"Yes, *sir.*"

Her exit left the bridge empty except for Kirk. There was nothing he could do but pace and watch the big screen. Twelve minutes.

Then a buzzer went off in Kirk's back pocket. He yanked out his communicator.

"Kirk here."

"Lieutenant Uhura, sir. I've established contact with Doctor McCoy. He says he believes he has a partial solution, sir."

"Ask him what he means by partial."

There was an agonizing wait while Uhura presumably spelled out this message by banging on the inner hull. The metal was thick; probably she was using a hammer, and even so the raps would come through only faintly.

"Sir, he wants to discharge something—some sort of gas, sir—into the ship's ventilating system. He says he can do it from sick bay and that it will spread rapidly. He says it worked on Lieutenant Sulu and presumably will cure anybody else who's sick—but he won't vouch for its effect on healthy crew members."

"That sounded like typical McCoy caution, but ask him how he feels himself."

Another long wait. Then: "He says he felt very ill, sir, but is all right now, thanks to the antidote."

That might be true and it might not. If McCoy himself had the illness, there would be no predicting what he might actually be preparing to dump into the ship's air. On the other hand, to refuse him permission wouldn't necessarily stop him, either. If only that damned singing would stop! It made thinking almost impossible.

"Ask him to have Sulu say something; see if he sounds sane to you."

Another wait. Only ten minutes left now—three of which would have to be used for tune-up. And no telling how fast McCoy's antidote would spread, or how long it would need to take hold, either.

"Sir, he says Lieutenant Sulu is exhausted and he won't wake him, under the discretion granted him by his commission."

McCoy had that discretion, to be sure. But it could also be the cunning blind of a deranged mind.

"All right," Kirk said heavily. "Tell him to go' ahead with it."

"Aye aye, sir."

Uhura's carrier wave clicked out and Kirk pocketed his transceiver, feeling utterly helpless. Nine minutes.

Then, Riley's voice faltered. He appeared to have forgotten some of the words of his interminable song. Then he dropped a whole line. He tried to go on, singing "La, la, la," instead, but in a moment that died away too.

Silence.

Kirk felt his own pulse, and sounded himself subjectively. Insofar as he could tell, there was nothing the matter with him but a headache which he now realized he had had for more than an hour. He strode quickly to Uhura's console and rang the engine room.

There was a click from the g.c. speakers, and Riley's voice said hesitantly: "Riley here."

"Mr Riley, this is Kirk. Where are you?"

"Sir, I… I seem to be in the engine room. I'm… off post, sir."

Kirk drew a deep breath. "Never mind that. Give us power right away. Then open the door and let the chief engineer in. Stand out of the way when you do it, because he's trying to cut in with a phaser at full power. Have you got all that?"

"Yes, sir. Power, then the door—and stand back. Sir, what's this all about?"

"Never mind now, just do it."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk opened the bulkhead override. At once, there was the heavy rolling sound of the emergency doors between the sections opening, like a stone being rolled back from a tomb. Hitting the general alarm button, Kirk bawled: "All officers to the bridge! Crash emergency, six minutes! Mark and move!"

At the same time, the needles on the power board began to stir. Riley had activated the engines. A moment later, his voice, filled

with innocent regret, said into the general air: "Now there won't be a dance in the bowling alley tonight."

Once a new orbit around the disintegrating mass of La Pig had been established, Kirk found time to question McCoy. The medico looked worn down to a nubbin, and small wonder; his had been the longest vigil of all. But he responded with characteristic indirection.

"Know anything about cactuses, Jim?"

"Only what everybody knows. They live in the desert and they stick you. Oh yes, and some of them store water."

"Right, and that last item's the main one. Also, cactuses that have been in museum cases for fifty or even seventy years sometimes astonish the museum curators by sprouting. Egyptian wheat that's been in tombs for thousands of years will sometimes germinate, too."

Kirk waited patiently. McCoy would get to the point in his own good time.

"Both those things happen because of a peculiar form of storage called *bound water.* Ordinary mineral crystals like copper sulfate often have water hitched to their molecules, loosely; that's water-of-crystallization. With it, copper sulfate is a pretty blue gem, though poisonous; without it, it's a poisonous green powder. Well, organic molecules can bind water much more closely, make it really a part of the molecule instead of just loosely hitched to it. Over the course of many years, that water will come out of combination and become available to the cactus or the gram of wheat as a liquid, and then life begins all over again."

"An ingenious arrangement," Kirk said. "But I don't see how it nearly killed us all."

"It was in that sample of liquid Mr Spock brought back, of course—a catalyst that *promoted* water-binding. If it had nothing else to bind to, it would bind even to itself. Once in the bloodstream, the catalyst began complexing the blood-serum. First it made the blood more difficult to extract nutrients from, beginning with blood sugar, which starved the brain—hence the psychiatric symptoms. As the process continued, it made the blood too thick to pump, especially through the smaller capillaries—hence Joe's death by circulatory collapse.

"Once I realized what was happening, I had to figure out a way to poison the catalysis. The stuff was highly contagious, through

the perspiration, or blood, or any other body fluid; and catalysts don't take part in any chemical reaction they promote, so the original amount was always present to be passed on. I think this one may even have multiplied, in some semi-viruslike fashion. Anyhow, the job was to alter the chemical nature of the catalyst—poison it—so it wouldn't promote that reaction any more. I almost didn't find the proper poison in time, and as I told Lieutenant Uhura through the wall, I wasn't sure what effect the poison itself would have on healthy people. Luckily, none."

"Great Galaxy," Kirk said. "That reminds me of something. Spock invalided himself off duty just before the tail end of the crisis and he's not back. Lieutenant Uhura, call Mr Spock's quarters."

"Yes, sir."

The switch clicked. Out of the intercom came a peculiarly Arabic howl—the noise of the Vulcanian musical instrument Spock liked to practice in his cabin, since nobody else on board could stand to listen to it. Along with the noise, Spock's rough voice was crooning: "Alab, wes-craunish, sprai pu ristu, or en r'ljiik majiir auooo…"

Kirk winced. "I can't tell whether he's all right or not," he said. "Nobody but another Vulcanian could. But since he's not on duty during a crash alert, maybe your antidote did something to him it didn't do to us. Better go check him."

"Soon as I find my earplugs."

McCoy left. From Spock's cabin, the voice went on: "Rijii, bebe, p'salku pirtu, fror om…"

The voice rose toward an impassioned climax and Kirk cut the circuit. Rather than that, he would almost rather have "I'll take you home again, Kathleen," back again.

On the other hand, if Riley had sounded like that to Spock, maybe Spock had needed no other reason for feeling unwell. With a sigh, Kirk settled back to watch the last throes of La Pig. The planet was now little better than an irregularly bulging cloud of dust, looking on the screen remarkably like a swelling and disintegrating human brain.

The resemblance, Kirk thought, was strictly superficial. Once a planet started disintegrating, it was through. But brains weren't like that.

Given half a chance, they pulled themselves together.

Sometimes.

CHARLIE'S LAW*

(D. C. Fontana) **Charlie X*

Though as Captain of the starship *Enterprise* James Kirk had the final authority over four hundred officers and crewmen, plus a small and constantly shifting population of passengers, and though in well more than twenty years in space he had had his share of narrow squeaks, he was firmly of the opinion that no single person ever gave him more trouble than one seventeen-year-old boy.

Charles Evans had been picked up from a planet called Thasus after having been marooned there for fourteen years, the sole survivor of the crash of his parents' research vessel. He was rescued by the survey ship *Antares,* a transport about a tenth of the size of the *Enterprise,* and subsequently transferred to Kirk's ship, wearing hand-me-down clothes and carrying all the rest of his possessions in a dufflebag.

The officers of the *Antares* who brought him aboard the *Enterprise* spoke highly of Charlie's intelligence, eagerness to learn, intuitive grasp of engineering matters—"He could run the *Antares* himself if he had to"—and his sweetness of character; but it struck Kirk that they were almost elbowing each other aside to praise him, and that they were in an unprecedented hurry to get back to their own cramped ship, without even so much as begging a bottle of brandy.

Charlie's curiosity had certainly been obvious from those first moments, though he showed some trepidation, too—which was not surprising, considering his long and lonely exile. Kirk assigned Yeoman Rand to take him to his quarters. It was at this point that Charlie stunned her and everyone else present by asking Kirk honestly:

"Is that a girl?"

Leonard McCoy, the ship's surgeon, checked Charlie from top to toe and found him in excellent physical condition: no traces of malnutrition, of exposure, of hardship of any sort; truly remarkable for a boy who'd had to fend for himself on a strange world from the age of three. On the other hand, it was reasonable to suppose

that fourteen years later, Charlie would either be in good shape, or dead; he would have had to come to terms with his environment within the first few years.

Charlie was not very communicative about this puzzle, though he asked plenty of questions himself—he seemed earnestly to want to know all the right things to do, and even more urgently, to be liked, but the purport of some of McCoy's questions apparently baffled him.

No, nobody had survived the crash. He had learned English by talking to the memory banks on the ship; they still worked. No, the Thasians hadn't helped him; there were no Thasians. At first he had eaten stores from the wreck; then he had found some other things, growing around.

Charlie then asked to see the ship's rule book. On the *Antares,* he said, he hadn't done or said all the right things. When that happened, people got angry; he got angry, too. He didn't like making the same mistake twice.

"I feel the same way," McCoy told him. "But you can't rush such matters. Just keep your eyes open, and when in doubt, smile and say nothing. It works very nicely."

Charlie returned McCoy's grin, and McCoy dismissed him with a swat on the rump, to Charlie's obvious astonishment.

McCoy brought the problem up again on the bridge with Kirk and his second-in-command, Mr Spock. Yeoman Rand was there working on a duty roster, and at once volunteered to leave; but since she had seen as much of Charlie as anyone had, Kirk asked her to stay. Besides, Kirk was fond of her, though he fondly imagined that to be a secret even from her.

"Earth history is full of cases where a small child managed to survive in a wilderness," McCoy went on.

"I've read some of your legends," said Spock, who was native to a nonsolar planet confusingly called Vulcan. "They all seem to require a wolf to look after the infants."

"What reason would the boy have to lie, if there *were* Thasians?"

"Nevertheless there's some evidence that there were, at least millennia ago," Spock said. "The first survey reported some highly sophisticated artifacts. And conditions haven't changed on Thasus for at least three million years. There might well be *some* survivors."

"Charlie says there aren't," Kirk said.

"His very survival argues that there are. I've checked the library computer record on Thasus. There isn't much, but one thing it does say: 'No edible plant life.' He simply had to have had some kind of help."

"I think you're giving him less credit than he deserves," McCoy said.

"For the moment let's go on that assumption," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, work out a briefing program for young Charlie. Give him things to do—places to be. If we keep him busy until we get to Colony Five, experienced educators will take him over, and in the meantime, he should leave us with relative calm aboard. Yeoman Rand, what do you think of our problem child?"

"Wellll," she said. "Maybe I'm prejudiced. I wasn't going to mention this, but he followed me down the corridor yesterday and offered me a vial of perfume. My favorite, too; I don't know how he knew it. There's none in the ship's stores, I'm sure of that."

"Hmm," McCoy said.

"I was just going to ask him where he got it, when he swatted me on the rump. After that I made it my business to be someplace else."

There was an outburst of surprised laughter, quickly suppressed.

"Anything else?" Kirk said.

"Nothing important. Did you know that he can do card tricks?"

"Now, where would he have learned that?" Spock demanded.

"I don't know, but he's very good. I was playing solitaire in the rec room when he came in. Lieutenant Uhura was playing 'Charlie is my darling' and singing, and at first he seemed to think she was mocking him. When he saw she didn't mean it personally, he came over to watch me, and he seemed to be puzzled that I couldn't make the game come out. So he made it come out for me—without even touching the cards, I'd swear to that. When I showed I was surprised, he picked up the cards and did a whole series of tricks with them, good ones. The best sleight-of-hand I've ever seen. He said one of the men on the *Antares* taught him how. He was enjoying all the attention, I could tell that, but I didn't want to encourage him too much myself. Not after the swatting incident."

"He got *that* trick from me, I'm afraid," McCoy said.

"No doubt he did," Kirk said. "But I think I'd better talk to him, anyhow."

"Fatherhood becomes you, Jim," McCoy said, grinning.

"Dry up, Bones. I just don't want him getting out of hand, that's all."

Charlie shot to his feet the moment Kirk entered his cabin; all his fingers, elbows, and knees seemed to bend the wrong way. Kirk had barely managed to nod when he burst out: "I didn't do anything!"

"Relax, Charlie. Just wanted to find out how you're getting along."

"Fine. I… I'm supposed to ask you why I shouldn't—I don't know how to explain it."

"Try saying it straight out, Charlie," Kirk said. "That usually works."

"Well, in the corridor… I talked to… when Janice… when Yeoman Rand was…" Abruptly, setting his face, he took a quick step forward and slapped Kirk on the seat. "I did that and she didn't like it. She said you'd explain it to me."

"Well," Kirk said, trying hard not to smile, "it's that there are things you can do with a lady, and things you can't. Uh, the fact is, there's no right way to hit a lady. Man to man is one thing, man to woman is something else. Do you understand?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"If you don't, you'll just have to take my word for it for the time being. In the meantime, I'm having a schedule worked out for you, Charlie. Things to do, to help you learn all the things you missed while you were marooned on Thasus."

"That's very nice, for you to do that for me," Charlie said. He seemed genuinely pleased. "Do you like me?"

That flat question took Kirk off guard. "I don't know," he said equally flatly. "Learning to like people takes time. You have to watch what they do, try to understand them. It doesn't happen all at once."

"Oh," Charlie said.

"Captain Kirk," Lieutenant Uhura's voice broke in over the intercom.

"Excuse me, Charlie. Kirk here."

"Captain Ramart of the *Antares* is on D channel. Must speak to you directly."

"Right. I'll come up to the bridge."

"Can I come too?" Charlie said as Kirk switched out.

"I'm afraid not, Charlie. This is strictly ship's business."

"I won't disturb anybody," Charlie said. "I'll stay out of the way."

The boy's need for human company was touching, no matter how awkwardly he went about it. There were, many years of solitude to be made up for. "Well, all right," Kirk said. "But only when you have my permission. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Charlie said eagerly. He followed Kirk out like a puppy.

On the bridge, Lieutenant Uhura, her Bantu face intent as a tribal statue's, was asking the microphone: "Can you boost your power, *Antares?* We are barely reading your transmission."

"We are at full output, *Enterprise*" Ramart's voice said, very distant and hashy. "I must speak with Captain Kirk at once."

Kirk stepped up to the station and picked up the mike. "Kirk here, Captain Ramart."

"Captain, thank goodness. We're just barely in range. I've got to warn—"

His voice stopped. There was nothing to be heard from the speaker now but stellar static—not even a carrier wave.

"See if you can get them back," Kirk said.

"There's nothing to get, Captain," Lieutenant Uhura said, baffled. "They aren't transmitting any more."

"Keep the channel open."

Behind Kirk, Charlie said quietly: "That was an old ship. It wasn't very well constructed."

Kirk stared at him, and then swung toward Spock's station.

"Mr Spock, sweep the transmission area with probe sensors."

"I've got it," Spock said promptly. "But it's fuzzy. Unusually so even for this distance."

Kirk turned back to the boy. "What happened, Charlie? Do you know?"

Charlie stared back at him, with what seemed to be uneasy defiance. "I don't know," he said.

"The fuzzy area is spreading out," Spock reported. "I'm getting some distinct pips now along the edges. Debris, undoubtedly."

"But no *Antares?*"

"Captain Kirk, that *is* the *Antares,*" Spock said quietly. "No other interpretation is possible. Clearly, she blew up."

Kirk continued to hold Charlie's eye. The boy looked back.

"I'm sorry it blew up," Charlie said. He seemed uneasy, but nothing more than that. "But I won't miss them. They weren't very nice. They didn't like me. I could tell."

There was a long, terribly tense silence. At last Kirk carefully unclenched his fists.

"Charlie," he said, "one of the first things you're going to have to get rid of is that damned cold-bloodedness. Or self-centeredness, or whatever it is. Until that gets under control, you're going to be less than half human."

And then, he stopped. To his embarrassed amazement, Charlie was crying.

"He what?" Kirk said, looking up from his office chair at Yeoman Rand. She was vastly uncomfortable, but she stuck to her guns.

"He made a pass at me," she repeated. "Not in so many words, no. But he made me a long, stumbling speech. He wants me."

"Yeoman, he's a seventeen-year-old boy."

"Exactly," the girl said.

"All this because of a swat?"

"No, sir," she said. "Because of the speech. Captain, I've seen that look before; *I'm* not seventeen. And if something isn't done, sooner or later I'm going to have to hold Charlie off, maybe even swat him myself, and not on the fanny, either. That wouldn't be good for him. I'm his first love and his first crush and the first woman he ever saw and…" She caught her breath. "Captain, that's a great deal for anyone to have to handle, even one item at a time. All at once, it's murder. And he doesn't understand the usual put-offs. If I have to push him off in a way he does understand, there may be trouble. Do you follow me?"

"I think so, Yeoman," Kirk said. He still could not quite take the situation seriously. "Though I never thought I'd wind up explaining the birds and the bees to anybody, not at my age. But I'll send for him right now."

"Thank you, sir." She went out. Kirk buzzed for Charlie. He appeared almost at once, as though he had been expecting something of the sort.

"Come in, Charlie, sit down."

The boy moved to the chair opposite Kirk's desk and sat down, as if settling into a bear trap. As before, he beat Kirk to the opening line.

"Janice," he said. "Yeoman Rand. It's about her, isn't it?"

Damn the kid's quickness!"More or less. Though it's more about you."

"I won't hit her like that any more. I promised."

"There's more to it than that," Kirk said. "You've got some things to learn."

"Everything I do or say is wrong," Charlie said desperately. "I'm in the way. Dr McCoy won't show me the rules. I don't know what I am or what I'm supposed to be, or even *who.* And I don't know why I hurt so much inside all the time—"

"I do, and you'll live," Kirk said. "There's nothing wrong with you that hasn't gone haywire inside every human male since the model came out. There's no way to get over it, around it, or under it; you just have to live through it, Charlie."

"But, it's like I'm wearing my insides outside. I go around bent over all the time. Janice—Yeoman Rand—she wants to give me away to someone else. Yeoman Lawton. But she's just a… just a… well, she doesn't even smell like a girl. Nobody else on the ship is like Janice. I don't want anybody else."

"It's normal," Kirk said gently. "Charlie, there are a million things in the universe you can have. There are also about a hundred million that you can't. There's no fun in learning to face that, but you've got to do it. That's how things are."

"I don't like it," Charlie said, as if that explained everything.

"I don't blame you. But you have to hang on tight and survive. Which reminds me: the next thing on your schedule is unarmed defense. Come along to the gym with me and we'll try a few falls. Way back in Victorian England, centuries ago, they had a legend that violent exercise helped keep one's mind off women. I've never known it to work, myself, but anyhow let's give it a try."

Charlie was incredibly clumsy, but perhaps no more so than any other beginner. Ship's Officer Sam Ellis, a member of McCoy's staff, clad like Kirk and Charlie in work-out clothes, was patient with him.

"That's better. Slap the mat when you go down, Charlie. It absorbs the shock. Now, again."

Ellis dropped of his own initiative to the mat, slapped it, and rolled gracefully up onto his feet. "Like that."

"I'll never learn," Charlie said.

"Sure you will," Kirk said. "Go ahead."

Charlie managed an awkward drop. He forgot to slap until almost the last minute, so that quite a thud accompanied the slap.

"Well, that's an improvement," Kirk said. "Like everything else, it takes practice. Once more."

This time was better. Kirk said, "That's it. Okay, Sam, show him a shoulder roll."

Ellis hit the mat, and was at once on his feet again, cleanly and easily.

"I don't want to do that," Charlie said.

"It's part of the course," Kirk said. "It's not hard. Look." He did a roll himself. "Try it."

"No. You were going to teach me to fight, not roll around on the floor."

"You have to learn to take falls without hurting yourself before we can do that. Sam, maybe we'd better demonstrate. A couple of easy throws."

"Sure," Ellis said. The two officers grappled, and Ellis, who was in much better shape than the Captain, let Kirk throw him. Then, as Kirk got to his feet, Ellis flipped him like a poker chip. Kirk rolled and bounced, glad of the exercise.

"See what I mean?" Kirk said.

"I guess so," Charlie said. "It doesn't look hard."

He moved in and grappled with Kirk, trying for the hold he had seen Ellis use. He was strong, but he had no leverage. Kirk took a counter-hold and threw him. It was not a hard throw, but Charlie again forgot to slap the mat. He jumped to his feet flaming mad, glaring at Kirk.

"*That* won't do," Ellis said, grinning. "You need a lot more falls, Charlie."

Charlie whirled toward him. In a low, intense voice, he said: "Don't laugh at me."

"Cool off, Charlie," Ellis said, chuckling openly now. "Half the trick is in not losing your temper."

"*Don't laugh at me!*" Charlie said. Ellis spread out his hands, but his grin did not quite go away.

Exactly one second later, there was a pop like the breaking of the world's largest light bulb. Ellis vanished.

Kirk stared stupefied at the spot where Ellis had been. Charlie, too, stood frozen for a moment. Then he began to move

tentatively toward the door.

"Hold it," Kirk said. Charlie stopped, but he did not turn to face Kirk.

"He shouldn't have laughed at me," Charlie said. "That's not nice, to laugh at somebody. I was trying."

"Not very hard. Never mind that. What happened? What did you do to my officer?"

"He's gone," Charlie said sullenly.

"That's no answer."

"He's gone," Charlie said. "That's all I know. I didn't want to do it. He made me. He laughed at me."

And suppose Janice has to slap him? And there was the explosion of the *Antares*… Kirk stepped quickly to the nearest wall intercom and flicked it on. Charlie turned at last to watch him. "Captain Kirk in the gym," Kirk said. "Two men from security here, on the double."

"What are you going to do with me?" Charlie said.

"I'm sending you to your quarters. And I want you to stay there."

"I won't let them touch me," Charlie said in a low voice. "I'll make them go away too."

"They won't hurt you."

Charlie did not answer, but he had the look of a caged animal just before it turns at last upon its trainer. The door opened and two security guards came in, phaser pistols holstered. They stopped and looked to Kirk.

"Go with them, Charlie. We'll talk about this later, when we've both cooled off. You owe me a long explanation." Kirk jerked his head toward Charlie. The guards stepped to him and took him by the arms.

Or, tried to. Actually, Kirk was sure that they never touched him. One of them simply staggered back, but the other was thrown violently against the wall, as though he had been caught in a sudden hurricane. He managed to hold his footing, however, and clawed for his sidearm.

"No!" Kirk shouted.

But the order was way too late. By the time the guard had his hand levelled at the boy, he no longer had a weapon to hold. It had vanished, just like Sam Ellis. Charlie stared at Kirk, his eyes narrowed and challenging.

"Charlie," Kirk said, "you're showing off. Go to your quarters."

"No."

"Go with the guards, or I'll pick you up and carry you there myself." He began to walk steadily forward. "That's your only choice, Charlie. Either do as I tell you, or send me away to wherever you sent the phaser, and Sam Ellis."

"Oh, all right," Charlie said, wilting. Kirk drew a deep breath. "But tell them to keep their hands to themselves."

"They won't hurt you. Not if you do as I say."

Kirk called a general council on the bridge at once, but Charlie moved faster: by the time Kirk's officers were all present, there wasn't a phaser to be found anywhere aboard ship. Charlie had made them all "go away." Kirk explained what had happened, briefly and grimly.

"Given this development," McCoy said, "it's clear Charlie wouldn't have needed any help from any putative Thasians. He could have magicked up all his needs by himself."

"Not necessarily," Spock said. "All we know is that he can make things vanish—not make them appear. I admit that that alone would have been a big help to him."

"What are the chances," Kirk said, "that he's a Thasian himself? Or at least, something really unprecedented in the way of an alien?"

"The chance is there," McCoy said, "but I'd be inclined to rule it out. Remember I checked him over. He's ostensibly human, down to his last blood type. Of course, I could have missed something, but he was hooked to the body-function panel, too; the machine would have rung sixteen different kinds of alarms at the slightest discrepancy."

"Well, he's inhumanly powerful, in any event," Spock said. "The probability is that he was responsible for the destruction of the *Antares,* too. Over an enormous distance—well beyond phaser range."

"Great," McCoy said. "Under the circumstances, how can we hope to keep him caged up?"

"It goes further than that, Bones," Kirk said. "We can't take him to Colony Five, either. Can you imagine what he'd do in an open, normal environment—in an undisciplined environment?"

Clearly, McCoy hadn't. Kirk got up and began to pace.

"Charlie is an adolescent boy—probably human, but totally inexperienced with other human beings. He's short-tempered because he wants so much and it can't come fast enough for him. He's full of adolescent aches. He wants to be one of us, to be

loved, to be useful. But I remember when I was seventeen that I wished for the ability to remove the things and people that annoyed me, neatly and without fuss. It's a power fantasy most boys of that age have. Charlie doesn't have to wish. *He can do it.*

"In other words, in order to stay in existence, gentlemen, we'll have to make damn sure we don't annoy him. Otherwise—pop!"

"Annoyance is relative, Captain," Spock said. "It's all going to depend on how Charlie is feeling minute by minute. And because of his background, or lack of it, we have no ways to guess what little thing might annoy him next, no matter how carefully we try. He's the galaxy's most destructive weapon, and he's on a hair trigger."

"No," Kirk said. "He's not a weapon. He *has* a weapon. That's a difference we can use. Essentially, he's a child, a child in a man's body, trying to be a whole man. His trouble isn't malice. It's innocence."

"And here he is," McCoy said with false heartiness. Kirk swung his chair around to see Charlie approaching from the elevator, smiling cheerfully.

"Hi," said the galaxy's most destructive weapon.

"I thought I confined you to your quarters, Charlie."

"You did," Charlie said, the grin fading. "But I got tired of waiting around down there."

"Oh, all right. You're here. Maybe you can answer a few questions for us. Were you responsible for what happened to the *Antares?'*

"Why?"

"Because I want to know. Answer me, Charlie."

Breaths were held while Charlie thought it over. Finally, he said: "Yes. There was "a warped baffle plate on the shielding of their Nerst generator. I made it go away. It would have given sooner or later anyhow."

"You could have told them that."

"What for?" Charlie said reasonably. "They weren't nice to me. They didn't like me. You saw them when they brought me aboard. They wanted to get rid of me. They don't any more."

"And what about us?" Kirk said.

"Oh, I need you. I have to get to Colony Five. But if you're not nice to me, I'll think of something else." The boy turned abruptly and left, for no visible reason.

McCoy wiped sweat off his forehead. "What a chance you took."

"We can't be walking on eggs every second," Kirk said. "If every act, every question might irritate him, we might as well pretend that none of them will. Otherwise we'll be utterly paralyzed."

"Captain," Spock said slowly, "do you suppose a force field might hold him? He's too smart to allow himself to be lured into a detention cell, but we just might rig up a field at his cabin door. All the lab circuitry runs through the main corridor on deck five, and we could use that. It's a long chance, but—"

"How long would the work take?" Kirk said.

"At a guess, seventy-two hours."

"It's going to be a long seventy-two hours, Mr Spock. Get on it." Spock nodded and went out.

"Lieutenant Uhura, raise Colony Five for me. I want to speak directly to the Governor. Lieutenant Sulu, lay me a course away from Colony Five—not irrevocably, but enough to buy me some time. Bones—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a fat spark, and a choked scream of pain from Uhura. Her hands were in her lap, writhing together uncontrollably. McCoy leapt to her side, tried to press the clenched fingers apart.

"It's all right," she said. "I think. Just a shock. But there's no reason for the board to be charged like that—"

"Probably a very good reason," Kirk said grimly. "Don't touch it until further orders. How does it look, Bones?"

"Superficial burns," McCoy said. "But who knows what it'll be next time?"

"I can tell you that," Sulu said. "I can't feed new co-ordinates into this panel. It operates, but it rejects the course change. We're locked on Colony Five."

"I'm in a hurry," Charlie's voice said. He was coming out of the elevator again, but he paused as he saw the naked fury on Kirk's face.

"I'm getting tired of this," Kirk said. "What about the transmitter?"

"You don't need all that subspace chatter," Charlie said, a little defensively. "If there's any trouble, I can take care of it myself. I'm learning fast."

"I don't want your help," Kirk said. "Charlie, for the moment there's nothing I can do to prevent your interference. But I'll tell you this: you're quite right, I don't like you. I don't like you at all. Now beat it."

"I'll go," Charlie said, quite coolly. "I don't mind if you don't like me now. You will pretty soon. I'm going to make you."

As he left, McCoy began to swear in a low whisper.

"Belay that, Bones, it won't help. Lieutenant Uhura, is it just outside communications that are shorted, or is the intercom out too?"

"Intercom looks good, Captain."

"All right, get me Yeoman Rand. Janice, I have a nasty one for you—maybe the nastiest you've ever been asked to do. I want you to lure Charlie into his cabin. That's right. We'll be watching—but bear in mind that if you make him mad, there won't be much we can do to protect you. You can opt out if you want; it probably won't work anyhow."

"If it doesn't," Yeoman Rand's voice said, "it won't be because *I* didn't try it."

They watched, Spock's hand hovering over the key that would activate the force field. At first, Janice was alone in Charlie's cabin, and the wait seemed very long. Finally, however, the door slid aside, and Charlie came into the field of the hidden camera, his expression a mixture of hope and suspicion.

"It was nice of you to come here," he said. "But I don't trust people any more. They're all so complicated, and full of hate."

"No, they're not," Janice said. "You just don't make enough allowance for how *they* feel. You have to give them time."

"Then you do like me?"

"Yes, I like you. Enough to try to straighten you out, anyhow. Otherwise I wouldn't have asked to come here."

"That was very nice," Charlie said. "I can be nice, too. Look. I have something for you."

From behind his back, where it had already been visible to the camera, he produced the single pink rose bud he had been carrying and held it out. There had been no roses aboard ship, either; judging by that and the perfume, he could indeed make things appear as well as disappear. The omens did not look good.

"Pink *is* your favorite color, isn't it?" Charlie was saying. "The books say all girls like pink. Blue is for boys."

"It was a nice thought, Charlie. But this isn't really the time for courting. I really need to talk to you."

"But you asked to come to my room. The books all say that means something important." He reached out, trying to touch her face. She moved instinctively away, trying to circle for the door, which was now on remote control, the switch for it under Spock's other hand; but she could not see where she was backing and was stopped by a chair.

"No. I said I only wanted to talk and that's what I meant."

"But I only wanted to be nice to you."

She got free of the chair somehow and resumed sidling. "That's a switch on Charlie's Law," she said.

"What do you mean? What's that?"

"Charlie's Law says everybody better be nice to Charlie, or else."

"That's not true!" Charlie said raggedly.

"Isn't it? Where's Sam Ellis, then?"

"I don't know where he is. He's just gone. Janice, I only *want* to be nice. They won't let me. None of you will. I can give you anything you want. Just tell me."

"All right," Janice said. "Then I think you had better let me go. That's what I want now."

"But you said…" The boy swallowed and tried again. "Janice, I love you."

"No you don't. You don't know what the word means."

"Then show me," he said, reaching for her.

Her back was to the door now, and Spock hit the switch. The boy's eyes widened as the door slid back, and then Janice was through it. He charged after her, and the other key closed.

The force field flared, and Charlie was flung back into the room. He stood there for a moment like a stabled stallion, nostrils flared, breathing heavily. Then he said:

"All right. All right, then."

He walked slowly forward. Kirk swung the camera to follow him. This time he went through the force field as though it did not exist. He advanced again on Janice.

"Why did you do that?" he said. "You won't even let me try. None of you. All right. From now on I'm not trying. I won't keep any of you but the ones I need. I don't need you."

There came the implosion sound again. Janice was gone. Around Kirk, the universe turned a dull, aching gray.

"Charlie," he said hoarsely. The intercom carried his voice to Charlie's cabin. He looked blindly toward the source.

"You too, Captain," he said. "What you did wasn't nice either. I'll keep you a while. The *Enterprise* isn't quite like the *Antares.* Running the *Antares* was easy.

But if you try to hurt me again, I'll make a lot of other people go away. I'm coming up to the bridge now."

"I can't stop you," Kirk said.

"I know you can't. Being a man isn't so much. I'm not a man and I can do anything. You can't. Maybe I'm the man and you're not."

Kirk cut out the circuit and looked at Spock. After a while the First Officer said:

"That was the last word, if ever I heard it."

"It's as close as I care to come to it, that's for sure. Did that field react at all, the second time?"

"No. He went through it as easily as a ray of light. Easier—I could have stopped a light ray if I'd known the frequency. There seems to be very little he can't do."

"Except run the ship—and get to Colony Five by himself."

"Small consolation."

They broke off as Charlie entered. He was walking very tall. Without a word to anyone, he went to the helmsman's chair and waved to Sulu to get out of it. After a brief glance at Kirk, Sulu got up obediently, and Charlie sat down and began to play with the controls. The ship lurched, very slightly, and he snatched his hands back.

"Show me what to do," he told Sulu.

"That would take thirty years of training."

"Don't argue with me. Just show me."

"Go ahead, show him," Kirk said. "Maybe he'll blow us up. Better than letting him loose on Colony Five—"

"Captain Kirk," Lieutenant Uhura broke in. "I'm getting something from outside; subspace channel F. Ship to ship, I think. But it's all on instruments; I can't hear it."

"There's nothing there," Charlie said, his voice rough. "Just leave it alone."

"Captain?"

"I am the captain," Charlie said. Yet somehow, Kirk had the sudden conviction that he was frightened. And somehow, equally inexplicably, he knew that the *Enterprise* had to get that call.

"Charlie," he said, "are you creating that message—or are you blocking one that's coming in?"

"It's my game, Mr Kirk," Charlie said. "You have to find out. Like you said—that's how the game is played." He pushed himself out of the chair and said to Sulu, "You can have it now. I've locked on course for Colony Five again."

He could have done nothing of the sort in that brief period; not, at least, with his few brief stabs at the controls. Probably, his original lock still held unchanged. But either way, it was bad enough; Colony Five was now only twelve hours away.

But Charlie's hands were trembling visibly. Kirk said:

"All right, Charlie, that's the game—and the game is over. I don't think you can handle any more. I think you're at your limit and you can't take on one more thing. But you're going to have to. Me."

"I could have sent you away before," Charlie said. "Don't make me do it now."

"You don't dare. You've got my ship. I want it back. And I want my crew back whole, too—if I have to break your neck to do it."

"Don't push me," Charlie whispered. "*Don't push me.*"

At the next step forward, a sleet-storm of pain threw Kirk to the deck. He could not help crying out.

"I'm sorry," Charlie said, sweating. "I'm sorry—"

The subspace unit hummed loudly, suddenly, and then began to chatter in intelligible code. Uhura reached for the unscrambler.

"Stop that!" Charlie screamed, whirling. "I said, stop it!"

The pain stopped; Kirk was free. After a split-second's hesitation to make sure he was all there, he lunged to his feet. Spock and McCoy were also closing in, but Kirk was closer. He drew back a fist.

"Console is clear," Sulu's voice said behind him. "Helm answers."

Charlie dodged away from Kirk's threat, whimpering. He never had looked less like the captain of anything, even his own soul. Kirk held back his blow in wonder.

Pop!

Janice Rand was on the bridge, putting out both hands to steady herself. She was white-faced and shaken, but otherwise unharmed.

Pop!

"That was a hell of a fall, Jim," Sam Ellis' voice said. "Next time, take it a little—hey, what's all this?"

"Message is through," Lieutenant Uhura's voice said dispassionately. "Ship off our starboard bow. Identifies itself as from Thasus."

With a cry of animal panic, Charlie fell to the deck, drumming on it with both fists.

"Don't listen, don't listen!" he wailed. "No, no please! I can't live with them any more."

Kirk watched stolidly, not moving. The boy who had been bullying and manipulating them for so long was falling apart under his eyes.

"You're my friends. You *said* you were my friends. Remember—when I came aboard?" He looked up piteously at Kirk. "Take me home, to Colony Five. That's all I want. It's really all I want!"

"Captain," Spock said in an emotionless voice. "Something happening over here. Like a transporter materialization. Look."

Feeling like a man caught in a long fall of dominoes, Kirk jerked his eyes toward Spock. There was indeed something materializing on the bridge, through which Spock himself could now be seen only dimly. It was perhaps two-thirds as tall as a man, roughly oval, and fighting for solidity. It wavered and changed, and colors flowed through it. For a moment it looked like a gigantic human face; then, like nothing even remotely human; then, like a distorted view of a distant but gigantic building. It did not seem able to hold any state very long.

Then it spoke. The voice was deep and resonant. It came, not from the apparition, but from the subspace speaker; but like the apparition, it wavered, blurred, faded, blared, changed color, as if almost out of control.

"We are sorry for this trouble," it said. "We did not realize until too late that the human boy was gone from us. We searched a long time to find him, but space travel is a long-unused skill among us; we are saddened that his escape cost the lives of those aboard the first ship. We could not help them because they were exploded in this frame; but we have returned your people and your weapons to you, since they were only intact in the next frame. Now everything else is as it was. There is nothing to fear; we have him in control."

"No," Charlie said. He was weeping convulsively. Clambering to his knees, he grappled Kirk by a forearm. "I won't do it again. Please, I'll be nice. I won't ever do it again. I'm sorry about the *Antares,* I'm sorry. Please let me go with you, please!"

"Whee-oo," McCoy said gustily. "Talk about the marines landing —!"

"It's not that easy," Kirk said, looking steadily at the strange thing—a Thasian?—before him. "Charlie destroyed the other ship and will have to be punished for it. But thanks to you, all the other damage is repaired—and he is a human being. He belongs with his own people."

"You're out of your mind," McCoy said.

"Shut up, Bones. He's one of us. Rehabilitation might make him really one of us, reunite him to his own people. We owe him that, if he can be taught not to use his power."

"We gave him the power," the apparition said, "so that he could live. It cannot be taken back or forgotten. He will use it; he cannot help himself. He would destroy you and your kind, or you would be forced to destroy him to save yourselves. We alone offer him life."

"Not at all," Kirk said. "You offer him a prison-not even a half-life."

"We know that. But that damage was done long ago; we can do now only what little best is left. Since we are to blame, we must care for him. Come, Charles Evans."

"Don't let them!" Charlie gasped. "Don't let them take me! Captain—*Janice!* Don't you understand, I *can't even touch them*—"

The boy and the Thasian vanished, in utter silence. The only remaining sound was the dim, multifarious humming surround of the *Enterprise.*

And the sound of Janice Rand weeping, as a woman weeps for a lost son.

BALANCE OF TERROR

(Paul Sshneider)

When the Romulan outbreak began, Capt. James Kirk was in the chapel of the starship *Enterprise,* waiting to perform a wedding.

He could, of course, have declined to do any such thing. Not only was he the only man aboard the starship empowered to perform such a ceremony—and many others even less likely to occur to a civilian—but both the participants were part of the ship's complement: Specialist (phaser) Robert Tomlinson and Spec. 2nd Cl. (phaser) Angela Martine.

Nevertheless, the thought of refusing hadn't occurred to him. Traveling between the stars, even at "relativistic" or near-light speeds, was a long-drawn-out process at best. One couldn't forbid or even ignore normal human relationships over such prolonged hauls, unless one was either a martinet or a fool, and Kirk did not propose to be either.

And in a way, nothing could be more symbolic of his function, and that of the *Enterprise* as a whole, than a marriage. Again because of the vast distances and time lapses involved, the starships were effectively the only fruitful links between the civilized planets. Even interstellar radio, which was necessarily faster, was subject to a dozen different kinds of interruptions, could carry no goods, and in terms of human contact was in every way less satisfactory. On the other hand, the starships were as fructifying as worker bees; they carried supplies, medical help, technical knowledge, news of home, and—above all—the sight and touch of other people.

It was for the same complex of reasons that there was a chapel aboard the *Enterprise.* Designed by some groundlubber in the hope of giving offense to nobody (or, as the official publicity had put it, "to accommodate all faiths of all planets," a task impossible on the face of it), the chapel was simplified and devoid of symbols to the point of insipidity; but its very existence acknowledged that even the tightly designed *Enterprise* was a world in itself, and as

such had to recognize that human beings often have religious impulses.

The groom was already there when Kirk entered, as were about half a dozen crew members, speaking *sotto voce.* Nearby, Chief Engineer Scott was adjusting a small television camera; the ceremony was to be carried throughout the intramural network, and outside the ship, too, to the observer satellites in the Romulus-Remus neutral zone. Scotty could more easily have assigned the chore to one of his staff, but doing it himself was his acknowledgment of the solemnity of the occasion—his gift to the bride, as it were. Kirk grinned briefly. Ship's air was a solid mass of symbols today.

"Everything under control, Scotty?"

"Can't speak for the groom, sir, but all's well otherwise."

"Very good."

The smile faded a little, however, as Kirk moved on toward the blankly nondenominational altar. It bothered him a little—not exactly consciously, but somewhere at the back of his conscience—to be conducting an exercise like this so close to the neutral zone. The Romulans had once been the most formidable of enemies. But then, not even a peep had been heard from them since the neutral zone had been closed around their system, fifty-odd years ago. Even were they cooking something venomous under there, why should they pick today to try it—and with a heavily armed starship practically in their back yards?

Scotty, finishing up with the camera, smoothed down his hair self-consciously; he was to give the bride away. There was a murmur of music from the intercom—Kirk could only suppose it was something traditional, since he himself was tune-deaf—and Angela came in, flanked by her bridesmaid, Yeoman Janice Rand. Scott offered her his arm. Tomlinson and his best man were already in position. Kirk cleared his throat experimentally.

And at that moment, the ship's alarm went off.

Angela went white. Since she was new aboard, she might never have heard the jarring blare before, but she obviously knew what it was. Then it was replaced by the voice of Communications Officer Uhura: "Captain Kirk to the bridge! Captain Kirk to the bridge!"

But the erstwhile pastor was already out the door at a dead run.

Spock, the First Officer, was standing beside Lieutenant Uhura's station as Kirk and his engineer burst onto the bridge. Spock, the product of marriage between an earth woman and a father on Vulcan—not the imaginary Solar world of that name, but a planet of 40 Eridani—did not come equipped with Earth-human emotions, and Lieutenant Uhura had the impassivity of most Bantu women; but the air was charged with tension none the less. Kirk said: "What's up?"

"It's Commander Hansen, outpost satellite four zero two three," Spock said precisely. "They've picked up clear pips of an intruder in the neutral zone."

"Identification?"

"None yet, but the engine pattern is modern. Not a Romulan vessel, apparently."

"Excuse me, Mr Spock," a voice said from the comm board. "I'm overhearing you. We have a sighting now. The vessel is modern—but the markings are Romulan."

Kirk shouldered forward and took the microphone from Lieutenant Uhura's hand. "This is Captain Kirk. Have you challenged it, Hansen?"

"Affirmative. No acknowledgment. Can you give us support, Captain? You are the only starship in this sector."

"Affirmative."

"We're clocking their approach visually at…" Hansen's voice died for a moment. Then: "Sorry, just lost them. Disappeared from our monitors."

"Better transmit your monitor picture. Lieutenant Uhura, put it on our bridge viewscreen."

For a moment, the screen showed nothing but a scan of stars, fading into faint nebulosity in the background. Then, suddenly, the strange ship was there. Superficially, it looked much like an *Enterprise-class* starship; a domed disc, seemingly coming at the screen nearly edge-on—though of course it was actually approaching the satellite, not the *Enterprise.* Its size, however, was impossible to guess without a distance estimate.

"Full magnification, Lieutenant Uhura."

The stranger seemed to rush closer. Scott pointed mutely, and Kirk nodded. At this magnification, the stripes along the underside were unmistakable: broad shadows suggesting a bird of prey with half-spread wings. Romulan, all right.

From S-4023, Hansen's voice said urgently: "Got it again! Captain Kirk, can you see…"

"We see it."

But even as he spoke, the screen suddenly turned white, then dimmed as Uhura backed it hastily down the intensity scale. Kirk blinked and leaned forward tensely.

The alien vessel had launched a torpedolike bolt of blinding light from its underbelly. Moving with curious deliberateness, as though it were traveling at the speed of light in some other space but was loafing sinfully in this one, the dazzling bolt swelled in S-4023's camera lens, as if it were bound to engulf the *Enterprise* as well.

"She's opened fire!" Hansen's voice shouted. "Our screen's failed… we're…"

The viewscreen of the *Enterprise* spat doomsday light throughout the control room. The speaker squawked desperately and went dead.

"Battle stations," Kirk told Uhura, very quietly. "General alarm. Mr Spock, full ahead and intercept."

Nobody had ever seen a live Romulan. It was very certain that "Romulan" was not their name for themselves, for such fragmentary evidence as had been pieced together from wrecks, after they had erupted from the Romulus-Remus system so bloodily a good seventy-five years ago, suggested that they'd not even been native to the planet, let alone a race that could have shared Earthly conventions of nomenclature. A very few bloated bodies recovered from space during that war had proved to be humanoid, but of the hawklike Vulcanite type rather than the Earthly anthropoid. The experts had guessed that the Romulans might once have settled on their adopted planet as a splinter group from some mass migration, thrown off, rejected by their less militaristic fellows as they passed to some more peaceful settling, to some less demanding kind of new world. Neither Romulus nor Remus, twin planets whirling around a common center in a Trojan relationship to a white-dwarf sun, could have proved attractive to any race that did not love hardships for their own sakes.

But almost all this was guesswork, unsupported either by history or by interrogation. The Vulcanite races who were part of the Federation claimed to know nothing of the Romulans; and the Romulans themselves had never allowed any prisoners to be taken —suicide, apparently, was a part of their military tradition—nor had they ever taken any. All that was known for sure was that the Romulans had come boiling out of their crazy little planetary system on no apparent provocation, in primitive, clumsy cylindrical

ships that should have been clay pigeons for the Federation's navy and yet in fact took twenty-five years to drive back to their home world—twenty-five years of increasingly merciless slaughter on both sides.

The neutral zone, with its sphere of observer satellites, had been set up around the Romulus-Remus system after that, and for years had been policed with the utmost vigilance. But for fifty years nothing had come out of it—not even a signal, let alone a ship. Perhaps the Romulans were still nursing their wounds and perfecting their grievances and their weapons—or perhaps they had learned their lesson and given up—or perhaps they were just tired, or decadent—

Guesswork. One thing was certain now. Today, they had come out again—or one ship had.

The crew of the *Enterprise* moved to battle stations with a smooth efficiency that would hardly have suggested to an outsider that most of them had never heard a shot fired in anger. Even the thwarted bridal couple was at the forward phaser consoles, as tensely ready now to launch destruction as they had been for creation only a few hours before.

But there was nothing to fire at in the phaser sights yet. On the bridge, Kirk was in the captain's chair, Spock and Scott to either side of him. Sulu was piloting; Second Officer Stiles navigating. Lieutenant Uhura, as usual, was at the comm board.

"No response from satellites four zero two three, two four or two five," she said. "No trace to indicate any are still in orbit. Remaining outposts still in position. No sightings of intruding vessel. Sensor readings normal. Neutral zone, zero."

"Tell them to stay alert and report anything abnormal."

"Yes, sir."

"Entering four zero two three's position area," Sulu said.

"Lieutenant Uhura?"

"Nothing, sir. No, I'm getting a halo effect here now. Debris, I'd guess—metallic, finely divided, and still scattering. The radiant point's obviously where the satellite should be; I'm running a computer check now, but…"

"But there can't be much doubt about it," Kirk said heavily. "They pack a lot more punch than they did fifty years ago—which somehow doesn't surprise me much."

"What *was* that weapon, anyhow?" Stiles whispered.

"We'll check before we guess," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, put out a tractor and bring me in some of that debris. I want a full analysis–spectra, stress tests, X-ray diffusion, micro-chemistry, the works. We know what the hull of that satellite used to be made of. I want to know what it's like *now*—and then I want some guesses from the lab on how it got that way. Follow me?"

"Of course, sir," the First Officer said. From any other man it would have been a brag, and perhaps a faintly insulting one at that. From Spock it was simply an utterly reliable statement of fact. He was already on the intercom to the lab section.

"Captain," Uhura said. Her voice sounded odd.

"What is it?"

"I'm getting something here. A mass in motion. Nothing more. Nothing on visual, no radar pip. And no radiation. Nothing but a De Broglie transform in the computer. It could be something very small and dense nearby, or something very large and diffuse far away, like a comet. But the traces don't match for either."

"Navigator?" Kirk said.

"There's a cold comet in the vicinity, part of the Romulus-Remus system," Stiles said promptly. "Bearing 973 galactic east, distance one point three light hours, course roughly convergent…"

"I'd picked that up long ago," Uhura said. "This is something else. Its relative speed to us is one-half light, in toward the neutral zone. It's an electromagnetic field of some kind… but no kind I ever saw before. I'm certain it's not natural."

"No, it isn't," Spock said, with complete calmness. He might have been announcing the weather, had there been any out here. "It's an invisibility screen."

Stiles snorted, but Kirk knew from long experience that his half-Vulcanite First Officer never made such flat statements without data to back them. Spock was very odd by Earth-human standards, but he had a mind like a rapier. "Explain," Kirk said.

"The course matches for the vessel that attacked the last satellite outpost to disappear," Spock said. "Not the one we're tracking now, but four zero two five. The whole orbit feeds in along Hohmann D toward an intercept with Romulus. The computer shows that already."

"Lieutenant Uhura?"

"Check," she said, a little reluctantly.

"Second: Commander Hansen lost sight of the enemy vessel when it was right in front of him. It didn't reappear until it was just about to launch its attack. Then it vanished again, and we haven't seen it since. Third: Theoretically, the thing is possible, for a vessel of the size of the *Enterprise,* if you put almost all the ship's power into it; hence, you must become visible if you need power for your phasers, or any other energy weapon."

"And fourth, baloney," Stiles said.

"Not quite, Mr Stiles," Kirk said slowly. "This would also explain why just one Romulan vessel might venture through the neutral zone, right under the nose of the *Enterprise.* The Romulans may think they can take us on now, and they've sent out one probe to find out."

"A very long chain of inferences, sir," Stiles said, with marked politeness.

"I'm aware of that. But it's the best we've got at the moment. Mr Sulu, match course and speed exactly with Lieutenant Uhura's blip, and stick with it move for move. But under no circumstances cross after it into the neutral zone without my direct order. Miss Uhura, check all frequencies for a carrier wave, an engine pattern, any sort of transmission besides this De Broglie wave-front—in particular, see if you can overhear any chit-chat between ship and home planet. Mr Spock and Mr Scott, I'll see you both directly in the briefing room; I want to review what we know about Romulus. Better call Dr McCoy in on it, too. Any questions?" There were none. Kirk said, "Mark and move."

The meeting in the briefing room was still going on when Spock was called out to the lab section. Once he was gone, the atmosphere promptly became more informal; neither Scott nor McCoy liked the Vulcanite, and even Kirk, much though he valued his First Officer, was not entirely comfortable in his presence.

"Do you want me to go away too, Jim?" McCoy said gently. "It seems to me you could use some time to think."

"I think better with you here, Bones. You too, Scotty. But this could be the big one. We've got people from half the planets of the Federation patrolling the neutral zone. If we cross it with a starship without due cause, we may have more than just the Romulans to worry about. That's how civil wars start, too."

"Isn't the loss of three satellites due cause?" Scott said.

"I'd say so, but precisely what knocked out those satellites? A Romulan ship, we say; but can we prove it? Well, no, we say; the thing's invisible. Even Stiles laughs at that, and he's on our side. The Romulans were far behind us in technology the last we saw of them—they only got as far as they did in the war out of the advantage of surprise, plus a lot of sheer savagery. Now, suddenly, they've got a ship as good as ours, *plus* an invisibility screen. I can hardly believe it myself.

"And on the other hand, gentlemen… On the other hand, while we sit here debating the matter, they may be about to knock us right out of the sky. It's the usual verge-of-war situation: we're damned if we do, and damned if we don't."

The elevator door slid open. Spock was back. "Sir…"

"All right, Mr Spock. Shoot."

Spock was carrying a thick fascicle of papers bound to a clip board, held close to his body under one arm. His other hand swung free, but its fist was clenched. The bony Vulcanite face had no expression and could show none, but there was something in his very posture that telegraphed tension.

"Here are the analyses of the debris," he said in his inhumanly even voice. "I shan't bother you with the details unless you ask. The essence of the matter is that the Romulan weapon we saw used on S-4023 seems to be a molecular implosion field."

"Meaning what?" McCoy said roughly.

Spock raised his right fist over the plot board, still clenched. The knuckles and tendons worked for a moment. A fine metallic glitter sifted down onto the table.

"It fatigues metals," he said. "Instantly. The metal crystals lose cohesion, and collapse into dust—like this. After that, anything contained in the metal blows up of itself, because it isn't contained any more. I trust that's clear, Dr McCoy. If not, I'll try to explain it again."

"Damn you, Spock…"

"Shut up, Bones," Kirk said tiredly. "Mr Spock, sit down. Now then. We're in no position to fight among ourselves. Evidently we're even worse off than we thought we were. If the facts we have are to be trusted, the Romulans have, first, a practicable invisibility screen, and second, a weapon at the very least comparable to ours."

"Many times superior," Spock said stolidly. "At least in some situations."

"*Both* of these gadgets," McCoy said, "are Mr Spock's inventions, very possibly. At least in both cases, it's his interpretation of the facts that's panicking us."

"There are no other interpretations available at the moment," Kirk said through thinned lips. "Any argument about that? All right. Then let's see what we can make of them for our side. Scotty, what have *we* got that we can counter with, given that the Romulan gadgets are real? We can't hit an invisible object, and we can't duck an invisible gunner. Where does that leave us?"

"Fully armed, fast and maneuverable," the engineer said. "Also, they aren't quite invisible; Lieutenant Uhura can pick up their De Broglie waves as they move. That means that they must be operating at nearly full power right now, just running away and staying invisible. We've got the edge on speed, and I'd guess that they don't know that our sensors are picking them up."

"Which means that we can outrun them and know approximately what they're doing. But we can't out-gun them or see them."

"That's how it looks at the moment," Scott said. "It's a fair balance of power, I'd say, Jim. Better than most commanders can count on in a battle situation."

"This isn't a battle situation yet," Kirk said. "Nor even a skirmish. It's the thin edge of an interstellar war. We don't dare to be wrong."

"We can't be righter than we are with the facts at hand, sir," Spock said.

McCoy's lips twitched. "You're so damned sure…"

A beep from the intercom stopped him. Way up in the middle of the air, Lieutenant Uhura's voice said: "Captain Kirk."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Kirk said, his palms sweating.

"I've got a fix on the target vessel. Still can't see it—but I'm getting voices."

Even McCoy pounded up with them to the bridge. Up there, from the master speaker on the comm board, a strange, muted gabble was issuing, fading in and out and often hashed with static, but utterly incomprehensible even at its best. The voices sounded harsh and only barely human; but that could have been nothing more than the illusion of strangeness produced by an unknown language.

The Bantu woman paid no attention to anything but her instruments. Both her large hands were resting delicately on dial knobs, following the voices in and out, back and forth, trying to keep them in aural focus. Beside her left elbow a tape deck ran, recording the gabble for whatever use it might be later for the Analysis team.

"This appears to be coming off their intercom system," she said into the tape-recorder's mike. "A weak signal with high impedance, pulse-modulated. Worth checking what kind of field would leak such a signal, what kind of filtration spectrum it shows—oh, damn—no, there it is again. Scotty, is that you breathing down my neck?"

"Sure is, dear. Need help?"

"Get the computer to work out this waver-pattern for me. My wrists are getting tired. If we can nail it down, I might get a picture."

Scott's fingers flew over the computer console. Very shortly, the volume level of the gabble stabilized, and Lieutenant Uhura leaned back in her seat with a sigh, wriggling her fingers in mid-air. She looked far from relaxed, however.

"Lieutenant," Kirk said. "Do you think you can really get a picture out of that transmission?"

"Don't know why not," the Communications Officer said, leaning forward again. "A leak that size should be big enough to peg rocks through, given a little luck. They've got visible light blocked, but they've left a lot of other windows open. Anyhow, let's try…"

But nothing happened for a while. Stiles came in quietly and took over the computer from Scott, walking carefully and pointedly around Spock. Spock did not seem to notice.

"This is a funny business entirely," McCoy said almost to himself. "Those critters were a century behind us, back when we drove them back to their kennels. But that ship's almost as good as ours. It even *looks* like ours. And the weapons…"

"Shut up a minute, please, Dr McCoy," Lieutenant Uhura said. "I'm beginning to get something."

"Sulu," Kirk said. "Any change in their course?"

"None, sir. Still heading home."

"Eureka!" Lieutenant Uhura crowed triumphantly. "There it is!"

The master screen lit. Evidently, Kirk judged, the picture was being picked up by some sort of monitor camera in the Romulan's control room. That in itself was odd; though the *Enterprise* had

monitor cameras almost everywhere, there was none on the bridge—who, after all, would be empowered to watch the Captain?

Three Romulans were in view across the viewed chamber, sitting at scanners, lights from their hooded viewers playing upon their faces. They looked human, or nearly so: lean men, with almond-colored faces, dressed in military tunics which bore wolf's-head emblems. The severe, reddish tone of the bulkheads seemed to accentuate their impassivity. Their heads were encased in heavy helmets.

In the foreground, a man who seemed to be the commanding officer worked in a cockpit-like well. Compared to the bridge of the *Enterprise,* this control room looked cramped. Heavy conduits snaked overhead, almost within touch.

All this, however, was noted in an instant and forgotten. Kirk's attention was focused at once on the commander. His uniform was white, and oddly less decorated than those of his officers. Even more importantly, however, he wore no helmet. And in his build, his stance, his coloring, even the cant and shape of his ears, he was a dead ringer for Spock.

Without taking his eyes from the screen, Kirk could sense heads turning toward the half-Vulcanite. There was a long silence, except for the hum of the engines and the background gabble of the Romulan's conversation. Then Stiles said, apparently to himself: "So now we know. They got our ship design from spies. They can pass for us… or for some of us."

Kirk took no overt notice of the remark. Possibly it had been intended only for his ears, or for nobody's; until further notice he was tentatively prepared to think so. He said: "Lieutenant Uhura, I want linguistics and cryptography to go to work on that language. If we can break it…"

There was another mutter from Stiles, not intelligible but a good deal louder than before. It was no longer possible to ignore him.

"I didn't quite hear that, Mr Stiles."

"Only talking to myself, sir."

"Do it louder. I want to hear it."

"It wasn't…"

"Repeat it," Kirk said, issuing each syllable like a bullet. Everyone was watching Kirk and Stiles now except Spock, as though the scene on the screen was no longer of any interest at all.

"All right," Stiles said. "I was just thinking that Mr Spock could probably translate for us a lot faster than the analysts or the

computer could. After all, they're his kind of people. You have only to look at them to see that. We can all see it."

"Is that an accusation?"

Stiles drew a deep breath. "No, sir," he said evenly. "It's an observation. I hadn't intended to make it public, and if it's not useful, I'll withdraw it. But I think it's an observation most of us have already made."

"Your apology doesn't satisfy me for an instant. However, since the point's now been aired, we'll explore it. Mr Spock, do you understand the language those people are speaking? Much as I dislike Mr Stiles' imputation, there is an ethnic resemblance between the Romulans and yourself. Is it meaningful?"

"I don't doubt that it is," Spock said promptly. "Most of the people in this part of space seem to come from the same stock. The observation isn't new. However, Vulcan has had no more contact than Earth has with the Romulans in historical times; and I certainly don't understand the language. There are suggestions of roots in common with my home language—just as English has some Greek roots. That wouldn't help you to understand Greek from a standing start, though it might help you to figure out something about the language, given time. I'm willing to try it—but I don't hold out much hope of its being useful in time to help us out of our present jam."

In the brief silence which followed, Kirk became aware that the muttering from the screen had stopped. Only a second later, the image of the Romulan bridge had dissolved too.

"They've blocked the leak," Uhura reported. "No way to tell whether or not they knew we were tapping it."

"Keep monitoring it and let me know the instant you pick them up again. Make a copy of your tape for Mr Spock. Dr McCoy and Mr Scott, please come with me to my quarters. Everyone else, bear in mind that we're on continuous alert until this thing is over, one way or another."

Kirk stood up, and seemed to turn toward the elevator. Then, after a carefully calculated pause, he swung on Stiles.

"As for you, Mr Stiles: Your suggestion may indeed be useful. At the moment, however, I think it perilously close to bigotry, which is a sentiment best kept to yourself. Should you have another such notion, be sure I hear it *before* you air it on the bridge. Do I make myself clear?"

White as milk, Stiles said in a thin voice: "You do, sir."

In his office, Kirk put his feet up and looked sourly at the doctor and his engineer. "As if we didn't have enough trouble," he said. "Spock's a funny customer; he gets everybody's back hair up now and then just on ordinary days; and this… coincidence… is at best a damn bad piece of timing."

"If it is a coincidence," McCoy said.

"I think it is, Bones. I trust Spock; he's a good officer. His manners are bad by Earth standards, but I don't think much of Stiles' manners either at the moment. Let's drop the question for now. I want to know what to do. The Romulan appears to be running. He'll hit the neutral zone in a few hours. Do we keep on chasing him?"

"You've got a war on your hands if you do," McCoy said. "As you very well know. Maybe a civil war."

"Exactly so. On the other hand, we've already lost three outpost satellites. That's sixty lives—besides all that expensive hardware… I went to school with Hansen, did you know that? Well, never mind. Scotty, what do you think?"

"I don't want to write off sixty lives," Scott said. "But we've got nearly four hundred on board the *Enterprise,* and I don't want to write them off either. We've got no defense against that Romulan weapon, whatever it is—and the phasers can't hit a target they can't see. It just might be better to let them run back inside the neutral zone, file a complaint with the Federation, and wait for a navy to take over. That would give us more time to analyze these gadgets of theirs, too."

"And the language and visual records," McCoy added. "Invaluable, unique stuff—all of which will be lost if we force an engagement and lose it."

"Prudent and logical," Kirk admitted. "I don't agree with a word of it, but it would certainly look good in the log. Anything else?"

"What else do you need?" McCoy demanded. "Either it makes sense or it doesn't. I trust you're not suddenly going all bloody-minded on me, Jim."

"You know better than that. I told you I went to school with Hansen; and I've got kids on board here who were about to get married when the alarm went off. Glory doesn't interest me, either, *or* the public record. *I want to block this war.* That's the charge that's laid upon me now. The only question is, How?"

He looked gloomily at his toes. After a while he added: "This Romulan irruption is clearly a test of strength. They have two weapons. They came out of the neutral zone and challenged a starship with them—with enough slaughter and destruction to make sure we couldn't ignore the challenge. It's also a test of our determination. They want to know if we've gone soft since we beat them back the last time. Are we going to allow our friends and property to be destroyed just because the odds seem to be against us? How much peace will the Romulans let us enjoy if we play it safe now—especially if we let them duck back into a neutral zone they've violated themselves? By and large, I don't think there's much future in that, for us, for the Earth, for the Federation —*or even* for the Romulans. The time to pound that lesson home is now."

"You may be right," Scott said. "I never thought I'd say so, but I'm glad it isn't up to me."

"Bones?"

"Let it stand. I've one other suggestion, though. It might improve morale if you'd marry those two youngsters from the phaser deck."

"Do you think this is exactly a good time for that?"

"I'm not sure there's ever a right time. But if you care for your crew—and I know damn well you do—that's precisely the right way to show it at the moment. An instance of love on an eve of battle. I trust I don't embarrass you."

"You do, Doctor," Kirk said, smiling, "but you're right. I'll do it. But it's going to have to be quick."

"Nothing lasts very long," McCoy said enigmatically.

On the bridge, nothing seemed to have happened. It took Kirk a long moment to realize that the conference in his office had hardly taken ten minutes. The Romulan vessel, once more detectable only by the De Broglie waves of its motion, was still apparently fleeing for the neutral zone, but at no great pace.

"It's possible that their sensors can't pick us up either through that screen," Spock said.

"That, or he's trying to draw us into some kind of trap," Kirk said. "Either way, we can't meet him in a head-on battle. We need an edge… a diversion. Find me one, Mr Spock."

"Preferably nonfatal," Stiles added. Sulu half turned to him from the pilot board.

"You're so wrong about this," Sulu said, "you've used up all your mistakes for the rest of your life."

"One of us has," Stiles said stiffly.

"Belay that," Kirk said. "Steady as she goes, Mr Sulu. The next matter on the agenda is the wedding."

"In accordance with space law," Kirk said, "we are gathered together for the purpose of joining this woman, Angela Marline, and this man, Robert Tomlinson, in the bond of matrimony…"

This time there were no interruptions. Kirk closed his book and looked up.

"…And so, by the powers vested in me as Captain of the U.S.S. *Enterprise,* I now pronounce you man and wife."

He nodded to Tomlinson, who only then remembered to kiss the bride. There was the usual hubbub, not seemingly much muted by the fewness of the spectators. Yeoman Rand rushed up to kiss Angela's cheek; McCoy pumped Tomlinson's hand, slapped him on the shoulder, and prepared to collect his kiss from the bride, but Kirk interposed.

"Captain's privilege, Bones."

But he never made it; the wall speaker checked him. The voice was Spock's.

"Captain—I think I have the diversion you wanted."

"Some days," Kirk said ruefully, "nothing on this ship ever seems to get finished. I'll be right there, Mr Spock."

Spock's diversion turned out to be the cold comet they had detected earlier—now "cold" no longer, for as it came closer to the central Romulan-Reman sun it had begun to display its plumage. Spock had found it listed in the ephemeris, and a check of its elements with the computer had shown that it would cross between the *Enterprise* and the Romulan 440 seconds from now—not directly between, but close enough to be of possible use.

"We'll use it," Kirk declared promptly. "Mr Sulu, we'll close at full acceleration at the moment of interposition. Scotty, tell the phaser room we'll want a bracketing salvo; we'll be zeroing on sensors only, and with that chunk of ice nearly in the way, there'll be some dispersion."

"Still, at that range we ought to get at least one hit," Scott said.

"One minute to closing," Spock said.

"Suppose the shot doesn't get through their screen?" Stiles said.

"A distinct possibility," Kirk agreed. "About which we can do exactly nothing."

"Thirty seconds… twenty… fifteen… ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero."

The lights dimmed as the ship surged forward and at the same moment, the phaser coils demanded full drain. The comet swelled on the screen.

"All right, Mr Tomlinson… Hit 'em!"

The *Enterprise* roared like a charging lion. An instant later, the lights flashed back to full brightness, and the noise stopped. The phasers had cut out.

"Overload," Spock said emotionlessly. "Main coil burnout." He was already at work, swinging out a panel to check the circuitry. After only a split second of hesitation, Stiles crossed to help him.

"Captain!" Sulu said. "Their ship—it's fading into sight. I think we got a hit—yes, we did!"

"Not good enough," Kirk said grimly, instantly suspecting the real meaning of the Romulan action. "Full retro power! Evasive action!"

But the enemy was still faster. On the screen, a radiant torpedo like the one they had seen destroy Satellite 4023 was scorching toward the *Enterprise*—and this time it was no illusion that the starship was the target.

"No good," Sulu said. "Two minutes to impact."

"Yeoman Rand, jettison recorder buoy in ninety seconds."

"Hold it," Sulu said. "That shot's changing shape…"

Sure enough: the looming bolt seemed to be wavering, flattening. Parts of it were peeling off in tongues of blue energy; its brilliance was dimming. Did it have a range limit…

The bolt vanished from the screen. The *Enterprise* lurched sharply. Several people fell, including Spock—luckily away from the opened instrument panel, which crackled and spat.

"Scotty! Damage report!"

"One hold compartment breached. Minor damage otherwise. Main phaser battery still out of action, until that coil's replaced."

"I think the enemy got it worse, sir," Lieutenant Uhura said. "I'm picking up debris-scattering ahead. Conduits…castings…plastoform shadows…and an echo like the body of a casualty."

There was a ragged cheer, which Kirk silenced with a quick, savage gesture. "Maintain deceleration. Evidently they have to keep their screen down to launch their weapon—and the screen's still down."

"No, they're fading again, Captain," Sulu said. "Last Doppler reading shows they're decelerating too… Now they're gone again."

"Any pickup from their intercom, Lieutenant Uhura?"

"Nothing, sir. Even the De Broglies are fading. I think the comet's working against us now."

Now what in space did that mean? Fighting with an unknown enemy was bad enough, but when the enemy could become invisible at will. And if that ship got back to the home planet with all its data, there might well be nothing further heard from the Romulans until they came swarming out of the neutral zone by the millions, ready for the kill. That ship had to be stopped.

"Their tactics make sense over the short haul," Kirk said thoughtfully. "They feinted us in with an attack on three relatively helpless pieces, retreated across the center of the board to draw out our power, then made a flank attack and went to cover. Clearly the Romulans play some form of chess. If I had their next move, I'd go across the board again. If they did that, they'd be sitting in our ionization wake right now, right behind us—with reinforcements waiting ahead."

"What about the wreckage, sir?" Uhura said.

"Shoved out the evacuation tubes as a blind—an old trick, going all the way back to submarine warfare. The next time they do that, they may push out a nuclear warhead for us to play with. Lieutenant Sulu, I want a turnover maneuver, to bring the main phaser battery aligned directly astern. Mr Spock, we can't wait for main coil replacement any longer; go to the phaser deck and direct fire manually. Mr Stiles, go with him and give him a hand. Fire at my command directly the turnover's been completed. All understood?"

Both men nodded and went out, Stiles a little reluctantly. Kirk watched them go for a brief instant—despite himself, Stiles' suspicion of Spock had infected him, just a little—and then forgot them. The turnover had begun. On the screen, space astern, in the *Enterprise's* ionization wake, seemed as blank as space ahead, in the disturbed gasses of the now-dwindling comet's tail.

Then, for the third time, the Romulan ship began to materialize, precisely where Kirk had suspected it would be—and there was precisely nothing they could do about it yet. The bridge was dead silent. Teeth clenched, Kirk watched the cross-hairs on the screen

creep with infinite slowness toward the solidifying wraith of the enemy…

"All right, Spock, *fire!*"

Nothing happened. The suspicion that flared now would not be suppressed. With a savage gesture, Kirk cut in the intercom screen to the phaser deck.

For a moment he could make nothing of what he saw. The screen seemed to be billowing with green vapor. Through it, dimly, Kirk could see two figures sprawled on the floor, near where the phaser boards should have been. Then Stiles came into the field of view, one hand clasped over his nose and mouth. He was trying to reach the boards, but he must have already taken in a lungful of the green gas. Halfway there, he clutched at his throat and fell.

"Scotty! What is that stuff…"

"Coolant fluid," Scott's voice said harshly. "Seal must have cracked—look, there's Spock…"

Spock was indeed on the screen now, crawling on his hands and knees toward the boards. Kirk realized belatedly that the figures on the deck had to be Tomlinson and one of his crew, both dead since the seal had been cracked, probably when the Romulan had hit the *Enterprise* before. On the main screen, another of the Romulan energy bolts was bearing down upon them, with the inexorability of a Fury. Everything seemed to be moving with preternatural slowness.

Then Spock somehow reached the controls, dragged himself to his knees, moved nearly paralyzed fingers over the instruments. He hit the firing button twice, with the edge of his hand, and then fell.

The lights dimmed. The Romulan blew up.

On board the *Enterprise,* there were three dead: Tomlinson, his aide, and Stiles. Angela had escaped; she hadn't been on the deck when the coolant had come boiling out. Escaped—a wife of half a day, a widow for all the rest of her days. Stolidly, Kirk entered it all in the log.

The Second Romulan War was over. And never mind the dead; officially, it had never even begun.

WHAT ARE LITTLE GIRLS MADE OF?

(Robert Bloch)

That day the efficiency of the *Enterprise* bridge personnel was a real tribute to their professionalism. For a human drama was nearing its climax among them, the closer they came to the planet Exo III.

Its heroine was the Starship's chief nurse, Christine Chapel. She stood beside Kirk at his command chair, her eyes on the main viewing screen where the ice-bound planet was slowly rotating. Touched by the calm she was clearly struggling to maintain, he said, "We're now entering standard orbit, Nurse."

A flicker of her nervous anticipation passed over her face. "I know he's alive down there, Captain," she said.

Kirk said, "Five years have passed since his last message." It seemed only decent to remind this brave, loving, though perhaps vainly hoping woman of that sinister fact. But she answered him with firm certainty. "I know, sir. But Roger is a very determined man. He'd find some way to live."

Uhura spoke from her panel. "Beginning signals to surface, Captain."

"Run it through all frequencies, Lieutenant." Kirk rose to go and check the library computer screen. Spock, concentrated on it, said, "Ship's record banks show little we don't already know. Gravity of the planet one point one of Earth, sir. Atmosphere within safety limits."

"But surface temperatures are close to a hundred degrees below zero," Kirk said.

Spock, too, was conscious of the woman who was patiently awaiting her moment of truth. He lowered his voice. "It may have been inhabited once, but the sun in this system has been steadily fading for half a million years." He hit a switch. "Now for Doctor Korby, the hero of our drama, Captain…"

Onto the computer screen flashed a small photograph of a distinguished-looking man in his vital mid-forties. There was a printed caption beneath it and Spock read it aloud. "Doctor Roger

Korby, often called the 'Pasteur of archaeological medicine.' His translation of medical records salvaged from the Orion ruins revolutionized immunization techniques…"

"Those records were required reading at the Academy, Mr Spock. I've always wanted to meet him." Kirk paused. Then, he, too, lowered his voice. "Any chance at all that he could still be alive?"

Grave-faced, Spock shook his head. He switched off the photograph; and Uhura, as though confirming his negative opinion, called, "No return signal, Captain. Not on any frequency."

"One more try, Lieutenant." Kirk returned to the waiting woman who had heard Uhura's report. She said, "His last signal told about finding underground caverns…"

Her implication was only too obvious. Korby had sheltered in the caverns so deeply no signal could reach him. He was safe. He was still alive. Kirk, remembering how it is to be tortured by a hopeless hope, said gently, "Christine, since that last signal, two expeditions have failed to find him."

Uhura, making her second report, called, "I've run all frequencies twice now, Captain. "There's no—" A blast of static crackled from all the bridge speakers. It subsided—and a male voice, strong, resonant spoke. "This is Roger Korby," it said. "Come in, *Enterprise*. Repeating, this is Roger Korby…"

Christine swayed. Reaching for the support of Kirk's command chair, she whispered, "That's—his voice…"

It spoke again. "Do you read me, *Enterprise?* This is Doctor Roger Korby, standing by…"

Kirk seized his speaker. "*Enterprise* to Korby. Thank you. We have your landing coordinates pinpointed. Preparing to beam down a party." He smiled up at Christine. "It may interest you to know that we have aboard this vessel—"

Korby's voice interrupted. "I have a rather unusual request, Captain. Can you beam down alone, just yourself? We've made discoveries of such a nature that this extraordinary favor must be required of you."

Astounded, Kirk took refuge in silence. Spock joined him, torn between his respect for the great scientist and the unprecedented demand. Cocking a brow, he said, "Odd. To say the least…"

"The man who's asked this is Roger Korby," Kirk said.

Spock spoke to Christine. "You're quite certain you recognized the voice?"

She laughed out of her great joy. "Have you ever been engaged to be married, Mr Spock? Yes, it's Roger."

Kirk made his decision. Hitting the speaker button, he said, "Agreed, Doctor. However, there will be two of us." He nodded to Christine, passing the speaker to her.

"Hello, Roger," she said;

There was a long pause. Then the unbelieving voice came. "Christine…?"

"Yes, Roger. I'm up here."

"Darling, how… what are you…" The voice poured excited enthusiasm through the speaker. "Yes, by all means, ask the Captain to bring you with him! I had no idea, no hope… Darling, are you all right? It's almost too much to credit…"

"Yes, Roger," she said. "Everything's all right. Now everything is just fine."

The anxious tension on the bridge had given way to a sympathetic delight. Kirk, feeling it, too, recovered his speaker. "We're on our way, Doctor. Be with you soon, both of us. Kirk out."

He made for the bridge elevator, followed by the radiant Christine.

They materialized in a rock cave. It was primitive, unfurnished. Beyond its rough entrance there stretched an unending snow-world; a world as white as death under its dark and brooding sky. Its horizon was jagged, peaked by mountains. In the half-twilight of the planet's dying sun, Kirk could see that they were shrouded in ice, cold, forbidding. It was a depressing arrival.

"He said he'd be waiting for us," Christine said.

Kirk also found the absence of welcome strange. He went forward to peer deeper into the cavern; and Christine, touching one of its walls, hastily withdrew her chilled fingers. Kirk, cupping his hands to his mouth called into the darkness, "Doctor Korby! Korby!" The rebounding echoes suggested a long extension of distance beyond the cavern.

He was aware of a sudden uneasiness. "I suppose it's possible," he said, "that we hit the wrong cavern entry." But the supposition didn't hold up. The beam-down coordinates had been checked with Korby in the Transporter Room. And Spock was right. Korby's request *had* been odd. He detached his communicator from his belt. "Captain to *Enterprise*."

"Spock here, sir."

"Beam down a couple of security men," Kirk said.

"Any problems, Captain?"

"Some delay in meeting us, Mr Spock. Probably nothing at all. Kirk out." He motioned to Christine to join him at a wall to leave the cave's center open for the beam-down. "Getting up here to us may be taking more time than the Doctor estimated," he told her. "The corridors of this place may go deeper than we know."

She said, "Thank you, Captain. I'm trying not to worry."

He felt distinct relief when crewmen Matthews and Rayburn sparkled into materialization. Spock had seen to it that they were both fully armed. "Maintain your position here in this cave, Rayburn." Turning to Matthews, he added, "Nurse Chapel and I are going to investigate a little further. You'll go with us."

They found the narrow passageway that led out of the cave. They found it by groping along a wall. It slanted downward. The inky blackness ahead of them endorsed what the echoes had suggested. The passageway could divide itself into many unseen and distant directions.

The light grew still dimmer. Abruptly, Kirk halted. "Stop where you are," he told the others. He stooped for a stone and flung it into what he'd sensed lay right before him—an abyss. They could hear the stone rebounding from rock walls. Then there was silence —absolute. Christine had clutched at Kirk's arm when a light beam suddenly blazed at them, blinding them in its searchlight glare. Kirk jerked his phaser out. As he shielded his eyes with his left hand, a figure stepped in front of the light, a featureless shadow.

Christine hurried forward. "Roger!"

Kirk grabbed at her. "Careful! That drop-down…"

The figure stepped to what must have been a light-switch panel. The glare faded to a fainter light that revealed the rather ordinary face of a middle-aged man. Christine stared at him in mixed surprise and disappointment. It wasn't Korby. Kirk adjusted his phaser setting and stepped up beside her just as recognition broke into her face.

"Why, it's Doctor Brown!" she exclaimed. "He's Roger's assistant!" Identifying the man for Kirk, she rushed toward him, crying, "Brownie, where's Roger? Why…?"

She never finished her sentence. Behind them, Matthews shrieked, "Capt—! Ahhhhhhhhhhhh…hhh…"

The scream died in the depths of the abyss. Then there was only the clatter of stones dislodged by Matthews' misstep.

Sickened, Kirk pulled himself out of his shock. He went to his knees, edging himself dangerously near to the pit's rim. Pebbles were still falling from it into the blackness below. Brown joined him. "Careful… please be careful," he said.

Kirk rose. "Is there any path down?"

"There's no hope, Captain. It's bottomless."

Though Doctor Brown had warned of peril from the pit, he did not mention the momentary appearance of a huge, hairless nonhuman creature on the other, shadowy side of the pit. Perhaps he didn't see it. It remained only for a second before it was gone, a monstrous shadow lost in shadows. Instead, he said sympathetically, if unhelpfully, "Your man must have slipped."

"Any chance of a projection? A ledge of some kind?"

"None, Captain. We lost a man down there, too. Listen…" He reached for a heavy boulder and heaved it over the pit's edge. There was the same crashing of rebound—and then the same absolute silence.

"Unfortunate," Brown said. "Terribly unfortunate. Doctor Korby was detained. I came as rapidly as I could."

"Not soon enough," Kirk said.

He looked at Brown in his worn lab clothing. One learned composure in the presence of human death, if you lived with its daily threat for five years. His voice had sounded regretful. Was he regretful? Was he composed? Or was he cold, numb to feeling? Kirk could see that the weeping Christine had also sensed a certain peculiarity in Brown's response to Matthews' death.

She wiped her eyes on her uniform sleeve. "Brownie," she said suddenly, "don't you recognize me?"

"Explain," Brown said.

"You don't recognize me" she said.

"Christine, you look well," Brown said. He turned to Kirk. "My name is Brown. I am Doctor Korby's assistant. I presume you are Captain Kirk."

Something was definitely askew. Christine had already named Brown as Korby's assistant. And the man had addressed Kirk as "Captain" several times. Why did he now have to "presume" that he was Captain Kirk? Christine's uncertainty was mounting, too. Her eyes and ears insisted that Brown was indeed her old acquaintance—but the feeling of an off-kilter element in his present personality persisted. Of course, Time and harsh experience *did* make changes in people…

Kirk had returned to the pit's edge. "He's dead, I assure you," Brown said. "Come. Doctor Korby will be waiting." He moved over to the searchlight panel to turn a couple of switches. Lights came on further along the corridor.

Kirk walked back to Christine. "You do know him well, don't you? This Brown is the Brown you remember, isn't he?"

She hesitated. "I—I suppose existing alone here for so long…"

Kirk reached for his phaser. Then he snapped open his communicator. "Captain Kirk to Rayburn."

"All quiet here, Captain. Any problems there, sir?"

"We've lost Matthews. An accident, apparently. Tell the *Enterprise* to have a full security party stand by."

"Yes, sir."

"And inform Mr Spock that we will both report in at hourly intervals. If you and I lose contact—or if he fails to hear from either of us—the security force is to be beamed down immediately. Kirk out"

He heard the snap-off of Rayburn's communicator. He couldn't hear what followed it—Rayburn's choking gurgle as the hairless creature's great arm lunged from the darkness to encircle his throat.

"This way, please," Brown was saying. "The illumination is automatic from here on."

It was a long walk. Brown appeared to feel a need to install himself as the interpreter of Korby's work. He dissertated. "The doctor has discovered that this planet's original inhabitants were forced to move underground as the warmth of their sun waned. When you were his student, Christine, you often heard him say that freedom of choice produced the human spirit. The culture of Exo III proved his theory. When its people were compelled to move from light to darkness, their culture also became choiceless, mechanistic. The doctor has found elements in it that will revolutionize the universe when removed from this cavernous environment."

The prediction struck Kirk as slightly grandiose. Polite Christine said, "That's fascinating."

"I thought you'd be interested," Brown said. "We have arrived, Captain."

The place of their arrival was a large and luxurious study. Though its walls were of rock, they were so finely polished they conveyed an impression of massive grandeur. Modern taste had been sensitively superimposed on the foundations constructed by

the ancient race. In their five years of underground life, Korby and his staff had clearly undertaken to make themselves comfortable. And well supplied. There were huge cabinets of gleaming scientific instruments, archaeological tools, favorite artifacts found and cherished. Odd-looking doors led out of the room into other unseen ones. In one corner was a dining area complete with tables and chairs.

One of the doors opened. A girl came in, pale, slim, dark-haired. There was a serene innocence in her face that merited the word "lovely." Her lips moved in a smile that exposed her perfect teeth.

"I'm Andrea," she said. "You must be Christine. I've always thought it was a beautiful name."

Christine was unpleasantly startled. Youthfully innocent she might be, but the girl was nevertheless a woman. And why she was serving as hostess in Korby's personal study was a question his affianced wife was obviously asking herself.

Andrea was good as her job. She turned the lovely smile to Kirk. "And you must be Captain Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*. I can't tell you how we appreciate your bringing Roger's fiancée to him."

Christine stiffened at the use of Korby's first name. "I don't remember Doctor Korby's mentioning an 'Andrea' as a member of his staff."

The smile didn't waver. "You are exactly as Roger described you. No wonder he's missed you so."

Such awareness of Korby's intimate emotions did nothing to alleviate Christine's growing resentment. Kirk, conscious of it, said, "Where is Doctor Korby?"

"Here, Captain." A strong-faced man, easily seen to be the man of the *Enterprise* photograph, had emerged from another door. Kirk was absurdly reminded of a theatrical buildup to the star's entrance. That Korby was the star, there was no mistaking. Kirk, himself accustomed to command, recognized the self-assurance in another commander. Korby, his hand extended, said, "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

Kirk had lost a crewman to a brutal death. He didn't like Brown. Nor had he lost his heart to Andrea. Ignoring the hand, he contented himself with saying, "And I to meeting you, sir."

"Roger…" Christine said.

"Christine… darling…"

She went to him. He bent to kiss her outstretched hands. Kirk, still wary, saw the honest joy in both their faces. It was a reunion that recovered two relationships—the intellectual bond of teacher

and student, the bond of physical love between man and woman. Both loves still lived after all the years apart. So much was clear as they embraced—an embrace restrained in the others' presence but a double reunion that was real.

Christine lifted her head from his shoulder. Misty-eyed, she said, "I knew I'd find you."

He drew her back. "Forgive me, Captain. It's been a long time."

"There's no need to apologize, sir."

"The captain lost a man in the caverns, Doctor," Brown said.

There was no doubt of the horror on Korby's face. He released Christine to whirl on Brown. "What? How did it happen?"

"The pit near the outer junction. The edge must have given way."

Visibly shaken, Korby was silent. Then he spoke. "Captain, what can I say? I should have been there. I know the passages so well. I am sorry—so sorry."

"It isn't your fault, Doctor." Kirk had his communicator out. "Captain to Rayburn," he said. "Rayburn, report." As he waited for Rayburn's voice, he turned back to Korby. "I'll have to call my ship on a security confirmation. If you have any cargo requirements, any special needs, I'll be glad—"

"Captain!" Korby interrupted. His face was suddenly agitated. "I should much prefer—"

It was Kirk's turn to interrupt. He spoke loudly into the communicator. "Kirk to Rayburn. *Rayburn, are you receiving me?*"

He made an adjustment on the communicator and tried again. Then he gave himself a moment. "My other man has failed to respond, Doctor. It is now necessary that I call my ship…"

"No communications, Captain!"

It was Brown who had shouted. In his hand he held an old-style phaser rifle. It was aimed at Kirk's heart.

Aghast, Christine said, "Roger, what…"

"I'm sorry, dear," Korby said. "But if they should send down more people…"

Kirk, appalled by the sudden turn events had taken, realized that Andrea, rushing at him, had snatched the communicator from his hand.

"Roger!" Christine cried. "This man… this girl… Why do you allow…?"

"Your captain won't be harmed," Korby said hurriedly. "Christine, listen. You must admit the possibility that there are things here unknown to you but so vitally important that—"

"Doctor Korby!" Kirk shouted. "I have one man dead! Now I've got another one out of contact!"

"Take his weapon, Andrea," Korby said.

The girl began to circle Kirk to get at the phaser hung on the rear of his belt. He drew back—and Brown leveled the rifle at his forehead. Kirk grabbed for reason. "Doctor, I have a command to consider, crewmen, a Starship…"

"This is necessary, Captain. You will understand."

Kirk moved. He jerked out his phaser; and all in the same blur of action, ducked behind a heavy desk.

"Drop that rifle!" he said to Brown.

Instead, Brown's finger reached for the trigger. Kirk fired his phaser—and Brown fell.

Christine screamed, "Captain, behind you…!"

Her warning came too late. The hairless ape-thing had him by the arm. Under the fierce force of the grip, he was lifted high into the air, his whole body convulsed by the arm's agony. The phaser rang on the stone floor. Like a puppet, he kicked, helpless in the immense hand—and the other one struck him in the jaw. Christine screamed again. And he was dropped to fall, limp, half-conscious in a crumpled heap.

Christine, paralyzed with horror, stared vaguely around her as though seeking some answer to the incomprehensible. Then she saw what she had to see. Brown lay on the floor near Kirk, face upturned. There was no blood on the chest where the phaser beam had struck him. Instead, a metallic tangle of twisted dials and wires protruded from it… the infinitely complex circuitry required to animate an android robot.

Kirk found the strength to move his eyes. Then, he, too, saw what Christine had seen.

An anxious Spock was at Uhura's panel when she finally received Kirk's signal.

"Frequency open, sir," she told him, relief in her face.

He seized the speaker. "Spock here, Captain."

The familiar voice said, "Contact established with Doctor Korby."

"We were becoming concerned, Captain. Your check-in is overdue. Nor have we heard from your security team."

"There's no problem, Mr Spock. They're with me. Return to ship will take about forty-eight hours. Doctor Korby's records and specimens will need careful packing."

"We can send down a work detail, sir."

"Korby has ample staff here. It's just that the work is quite delicate."

Abruptly Spock asked, "Captain… Is everything all right down there?"

Nothing was all right down there.

Spock had received no signal from Kirk. The captain of the *Enterprise* was sitting on a bunk in a detention chamber, watching as his voice issued from the mouth of the hairless ape-thing across the room. His communicator looked like a cigarette lighter in the creature's enormous paw. Korby was supervising its performance. He wasn't enjoying it. There was real concern for Kirk in his face. But real or unreal, Korby's feelings, his work, the man himself had ceased to matter to Kirk. The hot rage he felt had burned up all save the overriding fact that a neolithic savage was masquerading as commander of the *Enterprise*.

He tensed on the bunk. The bald thing noted it; and clicking the communicator off, prepared for muscle work.

"Please be still," Korby said. "If you move or cry out, Ruk may injure you. At least wait until you and I can talk together."

The communicator snapped back on. And a yet more anxious Spock said to Ruk, "Acknowledge, Captain. You sound tired."

Kirk heard his exact intonation come again from the flabby lips. "It's just the excitement of what we've found out, Mr Spock. Korby's discoveries are scientifically amazing. All under control. Stand by for regular contact, Kirk out."

Ruk closed the communicator.

"This isn't a vain display, Captain," Korby said. "You know my reputation. Trust me."

"Yes, I know your reputation," Kirk said. "The whole galaxy knows who you are and what you used to stand for."

"There's so much you must learn before you make a judgment," Korby said. He turned to Ruk. "Andrea," he said tersely.

The loose mouth opened to say sweetly, "And you must be Captain Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*."

There was horror in the sound of the girlish voice emerging from the bald grotesque across the room. Kirk's obvious repulsion pleased it. Ruk began to show off.

It was Korby's voice now, saving, "Forgive me, Captain. It's been a long time." Then it was Christine's turn. Ruk reproduced her precise emotional inflection in the words, "I knew I'd find you."

"Enough!" Korby said sharply. "You are not to mock Christine! You are never to harm her!"

"Or disobey an order from her?" Kirk said.

Korby rose to the challenge. To Ruk he said, "You will never disobey Christine's orders." He looked at Kirk. "Satisfied, Captain?" He came over to sit beside Kirk on the bunk. Ruk rose, menacing. Korby waved him back. "Give me just twenty-four hours to convince you, Captain."

"Must I be a prisoner to be convinced?"

"What would your first duty be on return to your ship? A report! Do you realize how many vital discoveries have been lost to laymen's superstitions, their ignorance?"

"Here is an ignorant layman's question for you, Doctor," Kirk said. "*Where is my man I could not contact?*"

"Ruk is programmed to protect my experiments. The logic of his machine-mind saw danger to me…"

"Where is my other crewman?" Kirk repeated.

Korby's voice was very quiet. "Ruk—destroyed them both, Captain. But totally against my wishes, believe me."

Kirk's fists clenched. He looked down at them; and deliberately relaxing them, swallowed. Putting interest into his voice, he said, "He's a robot, isn't he? Like Brown?"

Korby nodded to Ruk. The thing spoke heavily, dully. "More complex than Brown, much superior. The old ones made me."

Korby said, "Ruk was still tending the machinery when we arrived here. How many centuries old he is even Ruk doesn't know. With his help, with the records I could find, we built Brown."

"You've convinced me, Doctor," Kirk said. "You've convinced me that you're a very dangerous man…"

He pushed Korby off the bunk; and in a fast pivot, shoved him across the room at Ruk. Then he made a leap for the door. But Ruk was too quick for him. Moving with a surprising speed, the thing grabbed his arm and flung him back across the room. He struck the hard masonry of the wall, thrust against it to regain his

feet—but the move was useless. He was seized and lifted, a toy in the gigantic hand.

"Careful, Ruk!" Korby shouted. "Gently!"

The vise-like grip eased. But Ruk's notion of gentleness left something to be desired. He cuffed Kirk across the head—and dropped him, unconscious.

"Where is Captain Kirk?"

Christine stopped pacing the length of Korby's study to put the question to an Andrea who'd suddenly appeared through a door. The sweetly innocent looked back at her, puzzled.

"You are concerned about the captain when you are with Roger again? I do not understand."

There was that familiar use of his name again. Christine was engulfed by a desolate sense of helplessness. She could understand nothing at all, not the man she had loved so long, his purpose nor his companions.

"Yes," she said. "I am much concerned about the captain."

With manifest sincerity, her voice wholly guileless, Andrea said, "How can you love Roger without trusting him?"

Christine didn't answer. The query had gone straight to the heart of her agony. She began her restless pacing again and Andrea said, "Why does it trouble you when I use the name 'Roger'?"

"It is sufficient that it does trouble her."

Korby had entered the study. Ruk was with him, the giant hand tight on Kirk's arm. The door hummed closed behind them; and Korby, moving to Andrea, said, "You will call me 'Doctor Korby' from now on."

She said, "Yes, Doctor Korby."

He took Christine's cold hand, smiling down into her eyes. "As you can see, dear, Captain Kirk is fine. He won't be harmed. What's at stake here simply makes it necessary to prevent his reporting to his ship. I need time to explain, to demonstrate to him—and to you. Shall we start with Andrea?"

"Yes," she said. "Do start with Andrea."

The girl spoke simply, openly. "I am like Doctor Brown—an android robot. You did not know?"

"Remarkable, isn't she?" Korby said. He looked, back at Kirk. "Notice the lifelike pigmentation, the variation in skin tones." He lifted Andrea's wrist. "The flesh has warmth. There's even a pulse, physical sensation…"

"Remarkable, indeed," Christine said.

The bitter irony in her voice got through to Korby. He released Andrea's wrist. "Darling," he said to Christine, "all I require for my purpose are obedience and awareness…"

It was an unfortunate choice of words. Christine walked away from him. For a moment he lost his self-assurance. Then he followed her. "Christine. You must realize that an android robot is like a computer. It does only what I program into it. As a trained scientist yourself, you must surely see…"

"? that given a mechanical assistant, constructing a mechanical 'geisha' would be easy?"

Korby suddenly reached for Christine, pulling her close to him. "Do you think I could love a machine?" he demanded.

"Did you?" she said.

"Love can't exist where all is predictable! Christine, you must listen! Love must have imperfection—moments of worship, moments of hate. Andrea is as incapable of anger and fear as she is of love. She has no meaning for me. She simply obeys orders! Watch her…"

He spoke to Andrea. "Kiss Captain Kirk," he said.

She kissed Kirk.

"Now strike him," Korby said.

She slapped Kirk.

"You see, Christine? All she can do is what she's told to do. She's a sterile, a computer—a thing, not a woman." He whirled to Kirk. "Have you nothing to say, Captain?"

"Yes, Doctor, I have something to say," Kirk said, "If these inventions of yours can only do what they're told to do, why did Brown attack me? Who told him to do it? For that matter, who told this thing"—he indicated Ruk—"to kill two of my men?"

Korby's face went closed, cold. Taking Christine's arm, he said, "Come with me, darling. You owe it to me." She looked at Kirk, the feeling of nightmare helplessness still heavier in her limbs. Then she went with Korby.

His laboratory was at the end of a lengthy corridor. It was spotlessly white. Cabinets of gleaming equipment shared its walls with banks of computer-like control panels. But its dominating

feature was a large central turntable. It was flanked by two squat dynamos. Ruk was busy at the table. Into a scooped-out hollow in its top, he was fitting a mold of some greenish-brown stuff, roughly conformed to the height and breadth of a human body. As a cook pats dough into a bread pan, his gargantuan hands worked deftly to shape the mold into the indentation. It was when they reached for a shining, complicated mechanism suspended from the ceiling that Christine first noticed it. Then she saw there was a similar one hanging over the other side of the table. Ruk lowered the nearer device over the mold's midsection. Slowly the table began to turn.

Its opposite side slid into view. Kirk was lying on it, eyes closed, pressed down, immobile. The ceiling's other machine, descended over him, covered him from breast to thighs.

Pointing to it, Korby said proudly, "This is how we make an android robot."

With a signal to Ruk, he went over to a wall of control panels. He twisted a knob. Blue lights flashed deep, blinding, within the instrumentation that masked the alternately passing mold-form and the body of Kirk. The heavy dynamos glowed red, throbbing under impulses of power flowing to them from the control panel. When Korby made an adjustment to increase the turning speed of the table, a dizziness seized Christine. She leaned back against an equipment cabinet, her eyes shut against the vertigo. When she opened them, the blue lights were blazing, pulsating to the rhythm of a human heartbeat. And the table was spinning now, blurring the forms it held in a haze of speed so fast they appeared to be one.

Unknowingly she was wringing her hands. Korby left the panel to take them in his. "Don't be afraid for him. I promise you, he's not being harmed in any way."

She found stumbling words. "To fix a man to a table like a lab specimen on a slide… I don't… Oh, Roger, what's happened to you…? I remember when I sat in your class…" Tears choked her. "You wouldn't even consider injuring an animal, an insect… Life was sacred to you… It was what I loved about you…" She was openly weeping.

He took her in his arms. "I haven't changed, Christine. This is just a harmless demonstration to convince his skeptical, military mind. Please try and understand. If I'd beamed up to his ship with Brown and the others, they would have been objects of mere curiosity, freaks—the origin of wild rumors and destructive gossip."

"You don't *know* Captain Kirk!" she cried.

He patted her shoulder. "Now is the time to watch most carefully…" He left her to make some new, precise adjustment on the panel. Apparently, the table had reached its maximum acceleration. It was slowing down. In mingled amazement and horror, Christine caught a glimpse of the mold-form. It had assumed detailed human shape, human skin tones. The table came to a halt before her. Its niches held two identical Kirks.

Triumphant, Korby came back to her. "Which of the two is your captain, Christine? Can you tell?"

She shook her head. "I don't… know. I don't know—anything anymore."

"This one is your captain," Korby said. "Do you see any harm that's been done him?"

Kirk's eyes opened. Immediately aware that he couldn't move, he was struggling against the appliance that covered him when he saw Korby. His jaw muscles hardened; and he was about to speak when he decided to listen, instead. For Korby was expounding to Christine. "The android's synthetic organs are now all in place. We merely synchronized them with Kirk's autonomic nervous system, duplicating his body's rhythms. Now we must duplicate his mental patterns…"

A glimmer of realization came to Kirk. He saw Korby move to another control panel. He saw Andrea slip into the laboratory. And Ruk had gone into a crouch at the dynamo near his feet. He sensed what Korby was going to say before he said it. "Ruk, we're ready for final synaptic fusion. Andrea, stand by the cortex circuits. This android we're making will be so perfect, it could even replace the captain. It will have the same memories, the same abilities, the same attitudes…"

The implications of the boast were so appalling that they stimulated Kirk to a scurry of thinking faster than any he'd ever done in his life. As Korby shouted, "*Activate the circuits!*" he contorted his face with fury. As though mumbling to himself, he muttered, "Mind your business, Mr Spock! I'm sick of your halfbreed interference! Do you hear me? Mind your business, Mr Spock! I'm sick of your halfbreed—"

In midsentence a spasm of agony convulsed his body. Bolts of lightning seemed to split his head. The dynamo's hum screamed to an ear-shattering roar. Then the pain, the lightning, the roar were all over. Distraught, Christine ran to him. "I'm all right," he said. "It seems to be finished."

Korby came for her. "And now, my dear, you can meet my new android."

He gave the table a rotating twist. On it lay a perfect replica of Kirk. Its eyelids fluttered. Its gaze fastened on Christine and its lips moved in Kirk's characteristic smile of recognition. It said, "Nurse Chapel, how nice to see you."

Hostess Andrea was serving a meal to Christine in the study when Korby's new android opened its door. It was wearing Kirk's uniform.

"May I join you?" it said, seating itself at the table. "The doctor tells me I'm more or less on parole now. He thought you and I might like a little time together."

Christine whispered, "Captain, what are we…?"

The android also lowered its voice. "We've got to find a way to contact the ship."

"I don't know what's happened to Roger." She looked despairingly into what she thought were Kirk's eyes.

"If I gave you a direct order to betray him, would you obey it, Christine?"

She bowed her head. "Please, Captain. Don't ask me to make such a choice. I'd rather you pushed me off the precipice where Matthews died."

Andrea placed a bowl of soup before her. "Thank you," she said. "I'm not hungry."

Her table companion also pushed its bowl aside. "I'm not, either," it said. "But then I am not your captain, Nurse Chapel. We androids don't eat, you see."

She'd thought she'd had all the shocks she could take. But there was a cat-and-mouse aspect to this last one that chilled her. She'd been about to confide her heartbreak to this manufactured thing masquerading as Kirk. She pushed her chair back and rose from the table just as Korby entered the study. The real Kirk was with him—a pale, haggard Kirk clad in the kind of nondescript lab outfit which Brown had worn.

He sniffed at the smell of food. "I'm hungry," he said; and turning to Korby, added, "That's the difference between me and your androids, Doctor."

His replica got up from its chair. "The difference is your weakness, Captain, not mine."

"Eating is a human pleasure," Kirk retorted. "Sadly, it is one you will never know."

"Perhaps. But I shall never starve, either," the android said.

Kirk looked at Korby. "It is an exact duplicate?"

"In every detail."

Kirk spoke directly to the duplicate. "Tell me about Sam, Mr Android."

The answer came promptly. "George Samuel Kirk is your brother. Only you call him Sam."

"He saw me off on this mission."

"Yes. With his wife and three sons."

"He said he was being transferred to Earth Colony Two Research Station."

"No. He said he *wanted* a transfer to Earth Colony Two."

Korby intervened. "You might as well try to out-think a calculating machine, Captain."

"Obviously, I can't," Kirk said. "But we do have some interesting differences."

Korby was annoyed. "Totally unimportant ones." Abruptly, he dismissed his perfect android; and seating himself at the table, motioned Kirk and Christine to chairs. "Bring food," he told Andrea. "Lots of it. The captain is hungry."

As Kirk began eating, he leaned forward. "You haven't guessed the rest, have you? Not even you, Christine. What you saw was only a machine—*only half of what I could have accomplished had I continued the process of duplication*. I could have put *you*, Captain—your very consciousness into that android." He smiled faintly. "Your very 'soul' if you prefer the term. All of you. Brown was an example. My assistant was dying. I gave him life in android form."

Intensity came into his voice. "Yes, humans converted into androids can be programmed—but for the better! Can you conceive how life would be if we could do away with jealousy, greed, hate?"

Kirk said, "That coin has an opposite side, Doctor. You might also do away with tenderness, love, respect."

Korby slammed his fist on the table. "No death! No disease, no deformities! Even fear can be programmed out to be replaced with perpetual peace! Open your mind, Captain! I'm speaking of a practical heaven, a new Paradise—and all I need is your help!"

"I thought all you needed was my 'open mind,' " Kirk said.

"I've got to get transportation to a planet with the proper raw materials. There must be several possibilities among your next stops. I'm not suggesting any diversion from your route. I myself

want no suspicion aroused. I simply want to begin producing androids more carefully, selectively…"

Under his chair Kirk's hand had found a thong that bound its joints together. He located one end of it. "I can see your point," he said. "Any publicity about such a project could only frighten uninformed prejudice."

Korby nodded. "My androids must be widely infiltrated into human societies before their existence is revealed. Otherwise, we'd have a tidal wave of superstitious hysteria that could destroy what is right and good. Are you with me, Captain?"

Christine was staring at Korby in unbelief. Had the years of loneliness sent him mad? To advance such a cooperation to the captain of a Federation Starship! But Kirk was taking it quietly. "You've created your own Kirk, Doctor. You don't need me."

"I created him to impress you, Captain, not to replace you."

"You'd better use him," Kirk said. "I am impressed—but not the way you intended." He had the thong unraveled now.

"Ruk!" Korby called. "Ruk, take the captain to his quarters!"

As the hairless Caliban approached him, Kirk sat still, his hand busy with a slipknot he was putting into the cord under his chair. When Ruk reached for his shoulder, he tensed for action. All in one fast move, he ducked under Ruk's arm, leaped for Korby; and, dropping the slipknot over his head, jerked it tight around his throat. Then he ran for the door. Ruk made a lunge for him but was halted by the sound of Korby's agonized choking. Turning, he saw Korby fall from his chair, hands clawing at the cord that was throttling him. He hesitated. Then he returned to Korby to loosen the noose.

Christine went to help him. But Korby, furious, pushed her away. "Get after—" he broke off, coughing. Clearing his throat, he tried again. "Get after him, Ruk. Stop him. I have no more use for him. You understand?"

Ruk understood. So did Christine. She heard the growl rumble in the great chest as Ruk made for the door. She followed him, calling, "Ruk! Ruk, stop!" She could see the huge android speeding down the lighted corridor toward what she thought were Kirk's quarters. Then the figure disappeared around a corner. She turned with it into an unlighted passageway, still calling, "Ruk, stop! The doctor told you to obey my orders. Stop!"

The speed of the running footsteps increased. She raced on. "Ruk, where are you? I order you not to harm him! Do you hear me? He is not to be harmed! Ruk, where are you?"

He'd vanished into the darkness. And the character of the passage had changed. Its stone floor had become uneven and she stumbled over a pebble. It flung her against a rough, unpolished rock wall. The blackness swallowed the sound of the footsteps.

But Kirk heard them pounding behind him. He'd come to the end of the passage and was clambering over rocks. He fell into a gully between two boulders. He clung to one of them, listening.

"Captain Kirk?"

It was Ruk's voice, echoing hollowly among the rocks. Kirk hauled himself up over a boulder; and began to edge forward again through the pitch blackness, groping along a wall.

"Captain Kirk…"

The sound of the footsteps had ceased. But he could hear Ruk's heavy breathing, somewhere close. Frantically, Kirk felt around him for some kind of weapon. A sharp stalagmite jutted up from the floor. He wrestled with it. It was immovable. Desperate now, he seized a rock and crashed it over the stalagmite's pointed end. It broke. He scrabbled around among its pieces and found a club-like shard of it.

There came a hushed whisper. "Captain Kirk? Where are you?"

Now it was Christine's voice. Kirk peered into the darkness—and was about to answer when he remembered Ruk's trick of voice imitation.

It came again—Christine's voice. "Captain Kirk, help! I've lost my way! Don't leave me here…"

Was it Christine? Or was it Ruk? There was no way of telling. Kirk tightened his hold on his rock weapon. It just might be Christine, lost in this labyrinth of under-ground pathways. He might as well answer. The suspense was as difficult to bear as any fact would be. And he had taken all the precautions it was possible to take.

"Over here, Christine," he said.

Darker than the dark, the monstrous android loomed toward him, surefooted, moving easily, swiftly. Kirk struggled for solid rock under his feet, pivoted and was swinging his arm back for the strike when the edge of the rock that held him crumbled.

The solid footing he'd struggled for bordered a chasm. It fell away beneath him as sheer and deep as the one that had lost him Matthews. His fingertip clutch on its run was his clutch on life. He fought to maintain it against the rain of stones disturbed by the crumbled edge. One struck his head. He looked up to see Ruk leaning over it. He became aware that his fingers were weakening.

More debris loosened. The rock he clawed at cracked. As it gave way, Ruk's arm snaked down to seize one of his wrists. They exchanged a long look. Then slowly Ruk hauled him back up.

Spock saw the bridge elevator open. Kirk walked out of it and turned to stride down the corridor that led to his quarters. Spock hurried after him. "Captain!" he called. "I've just received word that you had beamed up."

Kirk was at his desk, leafing through a drawer for his command orders. "Doctor Korby has considerable cargo coming aboard, Mr Spock. I'll have to go over our destinations schedule with him."

Spock looked at the packet in his hand. Surprised, he said, "You're going back down with the command orders, sir?"

"Mind your business, Mr Spock!" Kirk shouted savagely. "I'm sick of your halfbreed interference! Do you hear me? Mind your business, Mr Spock! I'm sick of your halfbreed—"

Shocked, Spock stood stock-still. Kirk moved for the door. Spock, confounded, still staggered, tried again. "Are you feeling all right, Captain?"

All hardness had left Kirk's voice. He spoke quietly, his customary, courteous self. "Quite all right, thank you, Mr Spock. I'll beam up shortly with Dr Korby and his party." He eyed Spock, puzzled. "You look upset, Mr Spock. Everything all right up here?"

The Vulcan looked as bewildered as he'd ever permitted himself to appear. He finally decided to compromise with a noncommittal, "No problems here, sir."

He got himself a nod, a friendly smile and Kirk's exit to the corridor. But his sense of dismayed shock persisted. He went over to the intercom button in the cabin and hit it.

"Security, this is First Officer Spock. Status of your landing party?"

"Ready and standing by, sir."

"Wait until the captain has beamed down. Then have them meet me in the Transporter Room. All of the party, the captain included."

He was asking for trouble with Kirk. On the other hand, trouble between them already existed.

Korby was pleased with his new android's performance. He shuffled through the command-orders packet and his android said,

"I've looked them over. You'll find planet Midos V an excellent choice." It indicated a sheet among the others on Korby's desk.

"A small colony. And abundant raw materials." He rose. "You've made a good beginning, Captain Kirk."

"Thank you, Doctor," it said. "I felt quite at home on the *Enterprise*."

Down the corridor Kirk lay on the bed in his quarters, thinking, thinking. His life had been saved, but to what purpose he couldn't see. The *Enterprise* hijacked by the thing that wore his uniform… Some planet, perhaps the galaxy itself, doomed to be peopled by non-people… Humanoid life extinguished by the machines of Korby's making.

The door hummed open. Andrea entered with a tray of food. She placed it on the table.

Kirk sat up on his bunk. "Kiss me, Andrea," he said.

She kissed him. Then the cortical circuit that had obeyed a former order to kiss him activated the one connecting the kiss with a slap. She drew her hand back to strike him when Kirk seized it. "No," he said. He got up. Taking her in his arms, he gave her the most impassioned kiss in his repertoire. She liked it. But her circuitry protested. From somewhere in her came the tiny whine of a hard-pressed coil.

Panic-stricken, her responses chaotic, she pushed him away, crying, "Not you… not programmed for you…"

She went weaving, half-reeling toward the door. Kirk, alarmed, followed her, only to find Ruk standing guard in the corridor.

His eyes on Kirk, Ruk said, "To maintain your life is illogical."

"Why?" Kirk said.

Ruk didn't answer. Under the hairless scalp, his brain seemed to be fighting with a swarm of thoughts that confused him more cruelly than Andrea's terrified response to the kiss. Finally, he said. "You are no longer needed here."

"You want to kill me, Ruk? Or, as Doctor Korby calls it—turn me off?"

"You cannot be programmed. You are inferior."

"I want to live," Kirk said.

"You are from the outside," Ruk said. "You make disorder here."

"I'm not programmed. But I'll do anything, no matter how illogical to stay alive. Does that disturb you, Ruk?"

"Our place was peaceful. There was no threat to existence."

"Is existence important to you, too?"

"I am programmed to exist. Therefore, I exist."

The massive face was contorted with unaccustomed thought. Kirk felt a stab of pity. He said, "Korby speaks of you as just a machine to be turned on or turned off. That is a good thing to be, is it, Ruk?"

"You are evil. Until you came all was at peace here. That was good."

"I came in peace," Kirk said. "The only difference between us is that I have emotion. I have unpredictability. And with each human, our evil unpredictability increases. How would you like to live with thousands of unpredictable humans around you, all of them evil like me?"

Ruk was staring at him. "Yes, it was so… long ago. I had forgotten. The old ones here, the ones who made me, they were human… and evil. It is still in my memory banks… It became necessary to destroy them."

He turned his vast bulk slowly at the sound of footsteps. White-coated, self-assured, Korby was striding down the corridor.

Ruk lumbered toward him. "You… you brought him among us," he said heavily.

Startled, Korby looked from Kirk back to Ruk. "What?"

Ruk continued to advance on him. "You brought the inferior ones here!" His voice rose. "We had cleansed ourselves of them! You brought them and their evil back!"

"Ruk, I order you to stop! Go back! Stand away from me! You are programmed to—"

It was Korby who retreated. As Ruk made a grab for him, he drew Kirk's phaser from the white coat's pocket. There was no hesitation. He fired it. Ruk was gone. Where he'd stood was a charred spot, a drift of metallic-smelling smoke.

"You didn't have to destroy him," Kirk said into the tight silence.

Korby leveled the phaser at him. "Move," he said. "Ahead of me…"

A tense Christine stood at the door of the study, apparently awaiting the result of Korby's visit to Kirk's quarters. At the entrance, Kirk turned to face his captor. "You were once a man with respect for all living things. How is the change in you to be explained, Doctor? If I were to tell Earth that I am your prisoner, to tell them what you have become—"

He made a grab for the phaser. But Korby used it to shove him into the study. Then the door, humming shut, caught his other hand between it and the jamb. Kirk, about to exploit his advantage, paused. Korby's wedged hand was being cruelly mashed. Yet his right hand still held the phaser in an unwavering aim at Kirk. It seemed a remarkable fortitude. When he wrenched the smashed hand free, it struck Kirk as yet more remarkable.

Then a slow horror chilled him. Christine, too, was staring at the injured hand. Instead of revealing torn and mangled flesh, the wound had exposed a fine mesh of tiny complex gears and pulsing wires. Some connection in the wires short-circuited. A wisp of smoke rose from it, leaving a smell of scorched metal.

Korby saw Christine's face. "It's still me, Christine—your Roger… in this android form… You can't imagine why—how it was with me. I was frozen, dying, my legs were gone. I had only my brain between death and life…" He lifted the hand. "This can be repaired, more easily than any surgeon could possibly repair it. I'm the same man that you knew and loved—a better one. There will never be any death for me…never…"

She put her hands over her face to shut out the sight of the dangle of still-pulsing wires. Korby, turning to Kirk, cried, "Imagine it, Captain! A world with no corruption, no suffering, no death…"

"Then why keep me alive, Doctor?" Kirk said. "I am mere flesh and blood. So I shall die. You've got yourself an immortal Kirk. Why don't you kill this mortal one—and get done with me?"

"You know that answer," Korby said. "I am still the man you described—the one with respect for all living things. I am still that man."

"You are not that man, Doctor," Kirk said. "Look at Christine… heartbroken, terrified. Where is your human response to her suffering?"

As the question was taken in by his computer brain, Korby looked shaken. Its whirring circuits churned to no effective answer. So it dismissed the question. Recovering his composure, he went to a speaker built into a wall. "Andrea," he said, "come to the study."

The door hummed open and Kirk laid his arm around Christine's shoulders.

"Yes, Doctor," Andrea said.

"Someone is coming down the corridor," Korby told her.

"I will find Ruk," she said.

"Ruk has been turned off. Get Brown's weapon! Fast! Deal with it. *Protect!*"

She found Brown's old-style phaser in a desk drawer and hurried out of the study.

In full uniform, Kirk's facsimile was sauntering along the corridor. Its appearance puzzled Andrea. It also interested her. She moved toward the android, lifting her face to it.

"I will kiss you," she said.

"No!" it said sharply.

A look of anger flickered over her face.

"Protect," she said. Then she pulled the trigger of the phaser rifle. She looked down at the black ash that was all that remained, sniffing curiously at the drift of smoke. "Protect," she said again—and returned to the study.

Korby was shouting wildly. "I'm the *same!* A direct transfer—*all of me!* Wholly rational… human but without a flaw!"

Smiling, innocent, Andrea said, "I just turned off Captain Kirk."

"She's killed your perfect android," Kirk said. "Just as you killed Ruk. Is this your perfect world? Your flawless beings? Killing, killing, killing! Aren't you flawless beings doing exactly what you most hate in humans? Killing with no more feeling than you feel when you turn off a light?"

This time the computer brain was unable to dismiss the question. Kirk extended his hand. "Give me that phaser, Doctor. If any of the human Korby remains in you, you must know that your only hope is to give me that gun."

"No! You refuse to understand! I have constructed perfect beings… tested them…" Korby's face seemed to shrivel as his brain circuits told him he'd contradicted himself. His own illogic got through to them. "I—I have proven they are perfect… I… I have…"

With a look of blank bafflement, he gave the phaser to Kirk. Pale as death, Christine sank down on a chair.

"Give me your rifle, Andrea," Kirk said.

"No," she said. She waved him back with the weapon. "No… protect…" She moved to Korby. "I am programmed to love you, protect you. To kiss you…" She lifted her face to his.

Christine moaned faintly. Stunned, she watched Korby push Andrea away. "Don't touch me," he said. "You cannot love, you machine!" But Andrea still clung to him. The phaser she held came into position between them as Korby fought to free himself from

her arms. “Programmed,” Andrea said. “To love you… to kiss you…”

The rifle discharged. There was a flash of light. Then that, too, was gone. All that was left was the blur of smoke, the two piles of ash on the floor.

Dry-eyed, stumbling, Christine moved to Kirk. She was shuddering uncontrollably. He held her, the heiress to a permanent legacy of disillusioned loneliness.

As the last of the smoke dissolved, the study door was wrenched open. Spock and two security crewmen, phasers drawn, entered the study.

“Captain…” Spock hesitated. “You’re all right, sir? Nurse Chapel?”

“All right, Mr Spock,” Kirk said.

“Where is Dr Korby?” Spock asked.

Kirk took Christine’s hand. “He was never here, Mr Spock.”

He took it again when she approached his command chair in the bridge of the *Enterprise*.

“Thank you for letting me make my decision, Captain,” she said. “I’m fairly certain I’m doing the right thing.”

“I am, too,” he said. “Maybe you can get some sleep now that your decision is made.”

Neither smiled. “I’ll be seeing you around,” she said.

When she’d left the bridge, Spock said, “She’s brave.”

“That’s why we need her on the *Enterprise*, Mr Spock.” He looked at the viewing screen. “Helm, steady as she goes. Nurse Chapel has decided to remain with us.” But Spock still stood at the command chair. “Something bothering you, Mr Spock?”

“Captain, I… must protest your using the term ‘halfbreed’ in reference to me.”

“I didn’t *use* it, Mr Spock. I directed it toward you as a—”

“Even as an android, you might have thought of a better expression,” Spock said.

Kirk eyed him gravely. “I’ll remember that, Mr Spock, when I find myself in a similar position again.”

“Thank you, sir,” Spock said.

DAGGER OF THE MIND

(S. Bar-David)

Simon van Gelder came aboard the *Enterprise* from the Tantalus Penal Colony via transporter, inside a box addressed to the Bureau of Penology in Stockholm—a desperate measure, but not a particularly intelligent one, as was inevitable under the circumstances. He had hardly been aboard three minutes before Tristan Adams, the colony's director and chief medic, had alerted Captain Kirk to the escape ("a potentially violent case") and the search was on.

Nevertheless, in this short time van Gelder, who was six feet four and only in his early forties, was able to ambush a crewman, knock him out, and change clothes with him, acquiring a phaser pistol in the process. Thus disguised, he was able to make his way to the bridge, where he demanded asylum and managed to paralyze operations for three more minutes before being dropped from behind by one of Mr Spock's famous nerve squeezes. He was then hauled off to be confined in sick bay, and that was that.

Or that should have been that. Standard operating procedure would have been to give the captive a routine medical check and then ship him by transporter back to Tantalus and the specialized therapeutic resources of Dr Adams. Kirk, however, had long been an admirer of Dr Adams' rehabilitation concepts, and had been disappointed that ship's business had given him no excuse to visit the colony himself; now the irruption of this violent case seemed to offer an ideal opportunity. Besides, there was something about van Gelder himself that intrigued Kirk; in their brief encounter, he had not struck Kirk as a common criminal despite his desperation, and Kirk had not been aware that noncriminal psychiatric cases were ever sent to Tantalus. He went to visit the prisoner in the sick bay.

Dr McCoy had him under both restraint and sedation while running body function tests. Asleep, his face was relaxed, childlike, vulnerable.

"I'm getting bursts of delta waves from the electroencephalograph ," McCoy said, pointing to the body function panel. "Highly abnormal, but not schizophrenia, tissue damage, or any other condition I'm acquainted with. After I got him here, it took a triple dose of sedation to…"

He was interrupted by a sound from the bed, a strange combination of groan and snarl. The patient was coming back to consciousness, struggling against his bonds.

"The report said he was quite talkative," Kirk said.

"But not very informative. He'd claim one thing, seem to forget, then start to claim something else, and yet what little I could understand seemed to have the ring of truth to it. Too bad we won't have time to study him."

"So that's the system, is it?" the man on the bed said harshly, still struggling. "Take him back! Wash your hands of him! Let somebody else worry! Damn you…"

"What's your name?" Kirk said.

"My name… my name…" Suddenly, it seemed to Kirk that he was struggling not against the restraints, but against some kind of pain. "My name is… is Simon… Simon van Gelder."

He sank back and added almost quietly: "I don't suppose you've heard of me."

"Same name he gave before," McCoy said.

"Did I?" said van Gelder. "I'd forgotten. I was Director of… of… at the Tantalus Colony. Not a prisoner… I was… assistant. Graduate of… of…" His face contorted. "And then at… I did graduate studies at… studies at…"

The harder the man tried to remember, the more pain he seemed to be in. "Never mind," Kirk said gently. "It's all right. We…"

"I know," van Gelder said through clenched teeth. "They erased it, edited, adjusted, subverted me! I won't… I won't forget it! Won't go back there! Die first! Die, die!"

He had suddenly gone wild again, straining and shouting, his face a mask of unseeing passion. McCoy stepped close and there was the hiss of a spray hypo. The shouting died down to a mutter, then stopped altogether.

"Any guesses at all?" Kirk said.

"One point I don't have to guess at," McCoy said. "He doesn't want to go back to that… how did you describe it? 'More like a

resort than a prison.' Evidently a cage is still a cage, no matter how you label it."

"Or else there's something drastically wrong down there," Kirk said. "Keep him secure, Bones. I'm going to do a little research."

By the time Kirk returned to the bridge, Spock was already removing a tape casette from the viewer. "I got this from our library, Captain," he said. "No doubt about it: our captive is Dr van Gelder."

"Dr …?"

"That's right. Assigned to Tantalus Colony six months ago as Dr Adams' assistant. Not committed; assigned. A highly respected man in his field."

Kirk thought about it a moment, then turned to his Communications Officer. "Lieutenant Uhura, get me Dr Adams on Tantalus. Doctor? This is Captain Kirk of the *Enterprise.* Regarding your escapee…"

"Is Dr van Gelder all right?" Adams' voice cut in with apparent concern. "And your people? No injuries? In the violent state he's in…"

"No harm to him or anyone, sir. But we thought you might be able to enlighten us about his condition. My medical officer is baffled."

"I'm not surprised. He'd been doing some experimental work, Captain. An experimental beam we'd hoped might rehabilitate incorrigibles. Dr van Gelder felt he hadn't the moral right to expose another man to something he hadn't tried on his own person."

While Adams had been talking, McCoy had entered from the elevator and had crossed to the library-computer station, where he stood listening with Kirk and Spock. Now he caught Kirk's eye and made the immemorial throat-cutting gesture.

"I see," Kirk said into the microphone. "Please stand by a moment, Dr Adams." Uhura broke contact, and Kirk swung to McCoy. "Explain."

"It doesn't quite ring true, Jim," the medico said. "I don't think whatever's wrong with this patient is something he did to himself. I think it was something that was done to him. I can't defend it, it's just an impression—but a strong one."

"That's not enough to go on," Kirk said, irritated inspite of himself. "You're not dealing with just any ordinary warden here,

Bones. In the past twenty years, Adams has done more to revolutionize, to humanize, prisons and the treatment of prisoners than all the rest of humanity had done in forty centuries. I've been to penal colonies since they've begun following his methods. They're not 'cages' any more, they're clean, decent hospitals for sick minds. I'm not about to start throwing unsubstantiated charges against a man like that."

"Who said anything about charges?" McCoy said calmly. "Just ask questions. Propose an investigation. If something's really wrong, Adams will duck. Any harm in trying it?"

"I suppose not." Kirk nodded to Uhura, who closed the circuit again. "Dr Adams? This is rather embarrassing. One of my officers has just reminded me that by strict interpretation of our starship regulations, I'm required to initiate an investigation of this so that a proper report…"

"No need to apologize, Captain Kirk," Adams' voice said. "In fact, I'd take it as a personal favor if you could beam down personally, look into it yourself. I'm sure you realize that I don't get too many visitors here. Oh… I would appreciate it if you could conduct the tour with a minimum staff. We're forced to limit outside contact as much as possible."

"I understand. I've visited rehab colonies before. Very well. *Enterprise* out. Satisfied, McCoy?"

"Temporarily," the medical officer said, unruffled.

"All right. We'll keep van Gelder here until I complete my investigation, anyway. Find me somebody in your department with psychiatric *and* penological experience—both in the same person, if possible."

"Helen Noel should do nicely. She's an M.D., but she's written several papers on rehab problems."

"Very good. We beam down in an hour."

Though there were plenty of women among the *Enterprise's* officers and crew, Helen Noel was a surprise to Kirk. She was young and almost uncomfortably pretty, and furthermore, though Kirk had seen her before, he had not then realized that she was part of the ship's complement. That had been back at the medical lab's Christmas party. He had had the impression then that she was simply a passenger, impressed as female passengers often were to be singled out for conversation by the Captain; and in fact, in the general atmosphere of Holiday he had taken certain

small advantages of her impressionability. It now turned out that she was, and had then been, the newest addition to the ship's medical staff. Her expression as they met in the transporter room was demure, but he had the distinct impression that she was enjoying his discomfiture.

Tantalus was an eerie world, lifeless, ravaged, and torn by a bitter and blustery climate, its atmosphere mostly nitrogen slightly diluted by some of the noble gasses—a very bad place to try to stage an escape. In this it closely resembled all other penal colonies, enlightened or otherwise. Also as usual, the colony proper was all underground, its location marked on the surface only by a small superstructure containing a transporter room, an elevator head, and a few other service modules.

Dr Tristan Adams met them in his office: a man in his mid-forties, with broad warm features, a suspicion of old freckles at the nose, and an almost aggressively friendly manner which seemed to promise firm handshakes, humor, an ounce of brandy at the right hour, and complete candor at all times. He hardly seemed to be old enough to have accumulated his massive reputation. The office reflected the man; it was personal, untidy without being littered, furnished with an eye to comfort and the satisfaction of someone perhaps as interested in primitive sculpture as in social medicine.

With him was a young woman, tall and handsome though slightly cadaverous, whom he introduced as "Lethe." There was something odd about her which Kirk could not quite fathom: perhaps a slight lack of normal human spontaneity in both manner and voice. As if expecting just such a reaction, Adams went on: "Lethe came to us for rehabilitation, and ended up staying on as a therapist. And a very good one."

"I love my work," the girl said, in a flat voice.

With a glance at Adams for permission, Kirk said: "And before you came here?"

"I was another person," Lethe said. "Malignant, hateful."

"May I ask what crime you committed?"

"I don't know," Lethe said. "It doesn't matter. That person no longer exists."

"Part of our treatment, Captain, is to bury the past," Adams said. "If the patient can come to terms with his memories, all well and good. But if they're unbearable, why carry them at all? Sufficient unto the day are the burdens thereof. Shall we begin the tour?"

"I'm afraid we haven't time for a complete tour," Kirk said. "Under the circumstances, I'd primarily like to see the apparatus or experiment that injured Dr van Gelder. That, after all, is the whole point of our inquiry."

"Yes, quite. One doesn't enjoy talking about failures, but still, negative evidence is also important. If you'll just follow me…"

"One minute," Kirk said, pulling his communicator out of his hip pocket. "I'd best check in with the ship. If you'll pardon me a moment…?"

Adams nodded and Kirk stepped to one side, partly turning his back. In a moment, Spock's voice was saying softly: "Van Gelder's no better, but Dr McCoy has pulled a few additional bits and pieces out of his memory. They don't seem to change the situation much. He insists that Adams is malignant, the machine is dangerous. No details."

"All right. I'll check in with you at four-hour intervals. Thus far everything here seems open and above-board. Out."

"Ready, Captain?" Adams said pleasantly. "Good. This way, please."

The chamber in which van Gelder had allegedly undergone his mysterious and shattering conversion looked to Kirk's unsophisticated eye exactly like any other treatment room, perhaps most closely resembling a radiology theater. There was a patient on the table as Kirk, Adams, and Helen entered, seemingly unconscious; and from a small, complex device hanging from the ceiling, a narrow, monochromatic beam of light like a laser beam was fixed on the patient's forehead. Near the door, a uniformed therapist stood at a small control panel, unshielded; evidently, the radiation, whatever it was, was not dangerous at even this moderate distance. It all looked quite unalarming.

"This is the device," Adams said softly. "A neural potentiator, or damper. The two terms sound opposite to each other but actually both describe the same effect: an induced increase in neural conductivity, which greatly increases the number of cross-connections in the brain. At a certain point, as we predicted from information theory, increased connectivity actually results in the disappearance of information. We thought it would help the patient to cope better with his most troublesome thoughts and desires. But the effects are only temporary; so, I doubt that it'll be anything like as useful as we'd hoped it would be."

"Hmm," Kirk said. "Then if it's not particularly useful…"

"Why do we use it?" Adams smiled ruefully. "Hope, that's all, Captain. Perhaps we can still get some good out of it, in calming violent cases. But strictly as a palliative."

"Like tranquilizing drugs," Helen Noel suggested. "They do nothing permanent. And to continually be feeding drugs into a man's bloodstream just to keep him under control…"

Adams nodded vigorously. "Exactly my point, Doctor."

He turned toward the door, but Kirk was still eyeing the patient on the table. He swung suddenly on the uniformed therapist and said, "How does it operate?"

"Simply enough, it's nonselective," the therapist said. "On and off, and a potentiometer for intensity. We used to try to match the output to the patient's resting delta rhythms, but we found that wasn't critical. The brain seems to do its own monitoring, with some help from outside suggestion. For that, of course, you have to know the patient pretty well; you can't just put him on the table and expect the machine to process him like a computer tape."

"And we shouldn't be talking so much in his presence, for that very reason," Adams said, a faint trace of annoyance in his voice for the first time. "Better if further explanations waited until we're back in the office."

"I'd better ask my questions while they're fresh," Kirk said.

"The Captain," Helen said to Adams, "is an impulsive man."

Adams smiled. "He reminds me a little of the ancient skeptic who demanded to be taught all the world's wisdom while he stood on one foot."

"I simply want to be sure," Kirk said stonily, "that this is in fact where Dr van Gelder's injury occurred."

"Yes," Adams said, "and it was his own fault, if you must know. I dislike maligning a colleague, but the fact is that Simon is a stubborn man. He could have sat in here for a year with the beam adjusted to this intensity, or even higher. Or if there simply had been someone standing at the panel to cut the power when trouble began. But he tried it alone, at full amplitude. Naturally, it hurt him. Even water can poison a man, in sufficient volume."

"Careless of him," Kirk said, still without expression. "All right, Dr Adams, let's see the rest."

"Very well. I'd like to have you meet some of our successes, too."

"Lead on."

In the quarters which Adams' staff had assigned him for the night, Kirk called the *Enterprise,* but there was still nothing essentially new. McCoy was still trying to get past the scars in van Gelder's memory, but nothing he had uncovered yet seemed contributory. Van Gelder was exhausted; toward the end, he would say nothing but, "He empties us, and then fills us with himself. I ran away before he could fill me. It is so lonely to be empty…"

Meaningless; yet somehow it added up to something in Kirk's mind. After a while, he went quietly out into the corridor and padded next door to Helen Noel's room.

"Well!" she said, at the door. "What's this, Captain? Do you think it's Christmas again?"

"Ship's business," Kirk said. "Let me in before somebody spots me. Orders."

She moved aside, hesitantly, and he shut the door behind himself.

"Thanks. Now then, Doctor: What did you think of the inmates we saw this afternoon?"

"Why I was impressed, on the whole. They seemed happy, or at least well-adjusted, making progress."

"And a bit blank?"

"They weren't normal. I didn't expect them to be."

"All right. I'd like to look at that treatment room again. I'll need you; you must have comprehended far more of the theory than I did."

"Why not ask Dr Adams?" she said stiffly. "He's the only expert on the subject here."

"And if he's lying about anything, he'll continue to lie and I'll learn nothing. The only way I can be sure is to see the machine work. I'll need an operator; you're the only choice."

"Well, all right."

They found the treatment room without difficulty. There was nobody about. Quickly Kirk pointed out the controls the therapist had identified for him, then took up the position that had been occupied by the patient then. He looked ruefully up at the device on the ceiling.

"I'm expecting you to be able to tell if that thing is doing me any harm," he said. "Adams says it's safe; that's what I want to know. Try minimum output; only a second or two."

Nothing happened.

"Well? Any time you're ready."

"I've already given you two seconds."

"Hmm. Nothing happened at all."

"Yes, something did. You were frowning; then your face went blank. When I cut the power, the frown came back."

"I didn't notice a thing. Try it again."

"How do you feel now?"

"Somewhat, uh, nothing definite. Just waiting. I thought we were going to try again."

"We did," Helen said. "It looks as though your mind goes so completely blank that you don't even feel the passage of time."

"Well, well," Kirk said drily. "Remarkably effective for a device Adams said he was thinking of abandoning. The technician mentioned that suggestion was involved. Try one, something harmless, please. You know, when we finally get through this, I hope we can raid a kitchen somewhere."

"It works," Helen said in a strained voice. "I gave you two seconds at low intensity and said, 'You're hungry.' And now you are."

"I didn't hear a thing. Let's give it one more try. I don't want to leave any doubt about it."

"Quite right," Adams' voice said. Kirk sat bolt up right, to find himself staring squarely into the business end of a phaser pistol. The therapist was there too, another gun held unwaveringly on Helen.

"Prisons and mental hospitals," Adams went on, smiling, almost tolerantly, "monitor every conversation, every sound—or else they don't last long. So I'm able to satisfy your curiosity, Captain. We'll give you a proper demonstration."

He stepped to the control panel and turned the potentiometer knob. Kirk never saw him hit the on-off button. The room simply vanished in a wave of intolerable pain.

As before, there was no time lapse at all; he only found himself on his feet, handing his phaser to Adams. At the same time, he knew what the pain was: it was love for Helen, and the pain of loneliness, of being without her. She was gone; all he had was the memory of having carried her to her cabin that Christmas, of her protests, of his lies that had turned into truth. Curiously, the

memories seemed somewhat colorless, one-dimensional, the voices in them, monotonous; but the longing and the loneliness were real. To assuage it, he would lie, cheat, steal, give up his ship, his reputation… He cried out.

"She's not here," Adams said, passing Kirk's phaser to the therapist. "I'll send her back in a while and then things will be better. But first, it's time to call your vessel. It's important that they know all is well. Then perhaps we can see Dr Noel."

Through a renewed stab of pain, Kirk got out his communicator and snapped it open. "Captain to *Enterprise,*" he said. He found it very difficult to speak; the message did not seem to be important.

"*Enterprise* here, Captain," Spock's voice said.

"All is well, Mr Spock. I'm still with Dr Adams."

"You sound tired, Captain. No problems?"

"None at all, Mr Spock. My next call will be in six hours. Kirk out."

He started to pocket the communicator, but Adams held out his hand.

"And that, too, Captain."

Kirk hesitated. Adams reached for the control panel. The pain came back, redoubled, tripled, quadrupled; and now, at last, there came a real and blessed unconsciousness.

He awoke to the murmur of a feminine voice, and the feeling of a damp cloth being smoothed across his forehead. He opened his eyes. He was on his bed in the quarters on Tantalus; he felt as though he had been thrown there. A hand obscured his vision and he felt the cloth again. Helen's voice said: "Captain. Captain. They've taken you out of the treatment room. You're in your own quarters now. Wake up, please, please!"

"Helen," he said. Automatically, he reached for her, but he was very weak; she pushed him back without effort.

"Try to remember. He put all that in your mind. Adams took the controls away from me—do you remember the pain? And then his voice, telling you you love me."

He lifted himself on one elbow. The pain was there all right, and the desire. He fought them both, sweating.

"Yes, I think so," he said. Another wave of pain. "His machine's not perfect, I remember… some of it."

"Good. Let me wet this rag again."

As she moved away, Kirk forced himself to his feet, stood dizzily for a moment, and then lurched forward to try the door. Locked, of course. In here, he and Helen were supposed to consolidate the impressed love, make it real, and forget the *Enterprise.* Not bloody likely! Looking around, he spotted an air-conditioning grille.

Helen came back, and he beckoned to her, holding his finger to his lips. She followed him curiously. He tested the grille; it gave slightly. Throwing all his back muscles into it, he bent it outward. At the second try, it came free in his hand with a slight shearing sound. He knelt and poked his head into the opening.

The tunnel beyond was not only a duct; it was a crawl-space, intended also for servicing power lines. It could be crawled through easily, at least, as far as he could see down it. He tried it, but his shoulders were too bulky.

He stood up and held out his arms to the girl. She shrank back, but he jerked his head urgently, hoping that there was nothing in his expression which suggested passion. After a moment's more hesitation, she stepped against him.

"He may be watching as well as listening," Kirk whispered. "I'm just hoping he's focused on the bed, in that case. But that tunnel has to connect with a whole complex of others. It probably leads eventually to their power supply. If you can get through it, you can black out the whole place—and cut off their sensors, so Spock could beam us down some help without being caught at it. Game to try?"

"Of course."

"Don't touch any of those power lines. It'll be a bad squeeze."

"Better than Adams' treatment room."

"Good girl."

He looked down at her. The pain was powerful, reinforced by memory and danger, and her eyes were half-closed, her mouth willing. Somehow, all the same, he managed to break away. Dropping to her knees, she squirmed inside the tunnel and vanished, and Kirk began to replace the grille.

It was bent too badly to snap it back into place; he could only force it into reasonable shape and hope that nobody would notice that it wasn't fastened. He was on his feet and pocketing the sheared rivet heads when he heard the tumblers of the door lock clicking. He swung around just in time to see the therapist enter, holding an old-style phaser pistol. The man looked around incuriously.

"Where's the girl?" he said.

"Another of you zombies took her away. If you've hurt her, I'll kill you. Time for another 'treatment'?" He took a step closer, crouching. The pistol snapped up.

"Stand back! Cross in front of me and turn right in the corridor. I won't hesitate to shoot."

"That would be tough to explain to your boss. Oh, all right, I'm going."

Adams was waiting; he gestured curtly toward the table.

"What's the idea?" Kirk said. "I'm co-operating, aren't I?"

"If you were, you wouldn't have asked," Adams said. "However, I've no intention of explaining myself to you, Captain. Lie down. Good. Now."

The potentiator beam stabbed down at Kirk's head. He fought it, feeling the emptiness increase. This time, at least, he was aware of time passing, though he seemed to be accomplishing nothing else. His very will was draining away, as though somebody had opened a petcock on his skull.

"You believe in me completely," Adams said. "You believe in me. You trust me. The thought of distrusting me is intensely painful. You believe."

"I believe," Kirk said. To do anything else was agony.

"I believe in you. I trust you, I trust you! Stop, stop!"

Adams shut off the controls. The pain diminished slightly, but it was far from gone.

"I give you credit," Adams said thoughtfully. "Van Gelder was sobbing on his knees by now, and he had a strong will. I'm glad I've had a pair like you; I've learned a great deal."

"But… what… purpose? Your reputation… your… work…"

"So you can still ask questions? Remarkable. Never mind. I'm tired of doing things for others, that's all. I want a very comfortable old age, on my terms—and I am a most selective man. And you'll help me."

"Of course… but so unnecessary… just trust…"

"Trust you? Naturally. Or, trust mankind to reward me? All they've given me thus far is Tantalus. It's not enough. I know how their minds work. Nobody better."

There was the sound of the door, and then Kirk could see the woman therapist, Lethe. She said: "Dr Noel's gone. Nobody took her out. She just vanished."

Adams swung back to the panel and hit the switch. The beam came on, at full amplitude. Kirk's brainpan seemed to empty as if it

had been dumped down a drain.

"Where is she?"

"I… don't know…"

The pain increased. "Where is she? Answer!"

There was no possibility of answering. He simply did not know, and the pain blocked any other answer but the specific one being demanded. As if realizing this, Adams backed the beam down a little.

"Where did you send her? With what instructions? *Answer!*"

The pain soared, almost to ecstasy—and at the same instant, all the lights went out but a dim safe light in the ceiling. Kirk did not have to stop to think what might have happened. Enraged by agony, he acted on reflex and training. A moment later, the therapist was sprawled on the floor and he had Lethe and Adams covered with the old-style phaser.

"No time for you now," he said. Setting the phaser to "stun," he pulled the trigger. Then he was out in the corridor, a solid mass of desire, loneliness, and fright. He had to get to Helen; there was nothing else in his mind at all, except a white line of pain at having betrayed someone he had been told to trust.

Dull-eyed, frightened patients milled about him as he pushed toward the center of the complex, searching for the power room. He shoved them out of the way. The search was like an endless nightmare. Then, somehow, he was with Helen, and they were kissing.

It did not seem to help. He pulled her closer. She yielded, but without any real enthusiasm. A moment later, there was a familiar hum behind him: the sound of a transporter materialization. Then Spock's voice said: "Captain Kirk—what on…"

Helen broke free. "It's not his fault. Quick, Jim, where's Adams?"

"Above," Kirk said dully. "In the treatment room. Helen…"

"Later, Jim. We've got to hurry."

They found Adams sprawled across the table. The machine was still on. Lethe stood impassively beside the controls; as they entered, backed by a full force of security guards from the ship, she snapped them off: McCoy appeared from somewhere and bent over Adams. Then he straightened.

"Dead."

“I don’t understand,” Helen said. “The machine wasn’t on high enough to kill. I don’t think it could kill.”

“He was alone,” Lethe said stonily. “That was enough. I did not speak to him.”

Kirk felt his ringing skull. “I think I see.”

“I can’t say that I do, Jim,” McCoy said. “A man has to die of something.”

“He died of loneliness,” Lethe said. “It’s quite enough. I know.”

“What do we do now, Captain?” Spock said.

“I don’t know… let me see… get van Gelder down here and repair him, I guess. He’ll have to take charge. And then… he’ll have to decondition me. Helen, I don’t want that, I want nothing less in the world; but…”

“I don’t want it either,” she said softly. “So we’ll both have to go through it. It was nice while it lasted, Jim—awful, but nice.”

“It’s still hard to believe,” McCoy said, much later, “that a man could die of loneliness.”

“No,” Kirk said. He was quite all right now; quite all right. Helen was nothing to him but another female doctor. But…

“No,” he said, “it’s not hard to believe at all.”

MIRI

(Adrian Spies)

Any SOS commands instant attention in space, but there was very good reason why this one created special interest on the bridge of the *Enterprise.* To begin with, there was no difficulty in pinpointing its source, for it came not from any ship in distress, but from a planet, driven out among the stars at the 21-centimeter frequency by generators far more powerful than even the largest starship could mount.

A whole planet in distress? But there were bigger surprises to come. The world in question was a member of the solar system of 70 Ophiucus, a sun less than fifteen light-years away from Earth, so that in theory the distress signals could have been picked up on Earth not much more than a decade after their launching except for one handicap: From Earth, 70 Ophiucus is seen against the backdrop of the Milky Way, whose massed clouds of excited hydrogen atoms emit 21-centimeter radiation at some forty times the volume of that coming from the rest of the sky. Not even the planet's huge, hard-driven generators could hope to punch through that much stellar static with an intelligible signal, not even so simple a one as an SOS. Lieutenant Uhura, the communications officer of the *Enterprise,* picked up the signal only because the starship was at the time approaching the "local group"—an arbitrary sphere 100 light-years in diameter with Earth at its center—nearly at right angles to the plane of the galaxy.

All this, however, paled beside the facts about the region dug up by the ship's library computer. For the fourth planet of 70 Ophiucus, the computer said, had been the first extrasolar planet ever colonized by man—by a small but well-equipped group of refugees from the political disaster called the Cold Peace, more than five hundred years ago. It had been visited only once since then. The settlers, their past wrongs unforgotten, had fired on the visitors, and the hint had been taken; after all, the galaxy was full of places more interesting than a backwater like the 70 Ophiucus system, which the first gigantic comber of full-scale exploration

had long since passed. The refugees were left alone to enjoy their sullen isolation.

But now they were calling for help.

On close approach it was easy to see why the colonists, despite having been in flight, had settled for a world which might have been thought dangerously close to home. The planet was remarkably Earth-like, with enormous seas covering much of it, stippled and striped with clouds. One hemisphere held a large, roughly lozenge-shaped continent, green and mountainous; the other, two smaller triangular ones, linked by a long archipelago including several islands bigger than Borneo. Under higher magnification, the ship's screen showed the gridworks of numerous cities, and, surprisingly more faintly, the checkerboarding of cultivation.

But no lights showed on the night side, nor did the radio pick up any broadcasts nor any of the hum of a high-energy civilization going full blast. Attempts to communicate, once the *Enterprise* was in orbit, brought no response—only that constantly repeated SOS, which now was beginning to sound suspiciously mechanical.

"Whatever the trouble was," Mr Spock deduced, "we are evidently too late."

"It looks like it," Captain Kirk agreed. "But we'll go down and see. Mr Spock, Dr McCoy, Yeoman Rand, and two security guards, pick up your gear and report to me in the transporter room."

The landing party materialized by choice in the central plaza of the largest city the screen had shown—but there was no one there. Not entirely surprised, Kirk looked around.

The architecture was roughly like that of the early 2100s, when the colonists had first fled, and apparently had stood unoccupied for almost that long a period. Evidences of the erosion of time were everywhere, in the broken pavements, the towering weeds, the gaping windows, the windrows of dirt and dust. Here and there on the plaza were squat sculptures of flaking rust which had perhaps been vehicles.

"No signs of war," Spock said.

"Pestilence?" McCoy suggested. As if by agreement, both were whispering.

By the dust-choked fountain near which Kirk stood, another antique object lay on its side: a child's tricycle. It too was rusty, but still functional, as though it had been indoors during much of

the passage of time which had worn away the larger vehicles. There was a bell attached to the handlebar, and moved by some obscure impulse, Kirk pressed his thumb down on its lever.

It rang with a kind of dull sputter in the still air. The plaintive sound was answered instantly, from behind them, by an almost inhuman scream of rage and anguish.

"Mine! *Mine!*

They whirled to face the terrible clamor. A humanoid creature was plunging toward them from the shell of the nearest building, flailing its arms and screaming murderously. It was moving too fast for Kirk to make out details. He had only an impression of dirt, tatters, and considerable age, and then the thing had leapt upon McCoy and knocked him down.

Everyone waded in to help, but the creature had the incredible strength of the utterly mad. For a moment Kirk was face to face with it—an ancient face, teeth gone in a reeking mouth, contorted with wildness and hate, tears brimming from the eyes. Kirk struck, almost at random.

The blow hardly seemed to connect at all, but the creature sobbed and fell to the pocked pavement. He was indeed an old man, clad only in sneakers, shorts, and a ripped and filthy shirt. His skin was covered with multicolored blotches. There was something else odd about it, too—but what? Was it as wrinkled as it should be?

Still sobbing, the old head turned and looked toward the tricycle, and an old man's shaking hand stretched out toward it. "Fix," the creature said, between sobs. "Somebody fix."

"Sure," Kirk said, watching intently. "We'll fix it."

The creature giggled. "Fibber," it said. The voice gradually rose to the old scream of rage. "You bustud it! Fibber, fibber!"

The clawing hand grasped the tricycle as if to use it as a weapon, but at the same time the creature seemed to catch sight of the blotches on its own naked arm. The scream died back to a whimper. "Fix it—please fix it…"

The eyes bulged, the chest heaved, and then the creature fell back to the pavement. Clearly, it was dead. McCoy knelt beside it, running a tricorder over the body.

"Impossible," he muttered.

"That it's dead?" Kirk said.

"No, that it could have lived at all. Its body temperature is over one-fifty. It must have been burning itself up. Nobody can live at that temperature."

Kirk's head snapped up suddenly. There had been another sound, coming from an alley to the left.

"Another one?" he whispered tensely. "Somebody stalking us… over there. Let's see if we can grab him and get some information… Now!"

They broke for the alley. Ahead of them they could hear the stalker running.

The alley was blind, ending in the rear of what seemed to be a small apartment house. There was no place else that the stalker could have gone. They entered cautiously, phasers ready.

The search led them eventually to what had once been a living room. There was a dusty piano in it, a child's exercise book on the music rack. Over one brittle brown page was scribbled, "Practice, practice, practice!" But there was no place to hide but a closet. Listening at the door, Kirk thought he heard agitated breathing, and then, a distinct creak. He gestured, and Spock and the security men covered him.

"Come out," he called. "We mean no harm. Come on out."

There was no answer, but the breathing was definite now. With a sudden jerk, he opened the door.

Huddled on the floor of the closet, amid heaps of moldering clothing, old shoes, a dusty umbrella, was a dark-haired young girl, no more than fourteen—probably younger. She was obviously in abject terror.

"Please," she said. "No, don't hurt me. Why did you come back?"

"We won't hurt you," Kirk said. "We want to help." He held out his hand to her, but she only tried to shrink farther back into the closet. He looked helplessly at Yeoman Rand, who came forward and knelt at the open door.

"It's all right," she said. "Nobody's going to hurt you. We promise."

"I remember the things you did," the girl said, without stirring. "Yelling, burning, hurting people."

"It wasn't us," Janice Rand said. "Come out and tell us about it."

The girl looked dubious, but allowed Janice to lead her to a chair. Clouds of dust came out of it as she sat down, still half poised to spring up and run.

"You've got a foolie," she said. "But I can't play. I don't know the rules."

"We don't either," Kirk said. "What happened to all the people? Was there a war? A plague? Did they just go someplace else and

accidentally leave you here?"

"You ought to know. You did it—you and all the other grups."

"Grups? What are grups?"

The girl looked at Kirk, astonished. "You're grups. All the old ones."

"Grown-ups," Janice said. "That's what she means, Captain."

Spock, who had been moving quietly around the room with a tricorder, came back to Kirk, looking puzzled. "She can't have lived here, Captain," he said. "The dust here hasn't been disturbed for at least three hundred years, possibly longer. No radioactivity, no chemical contamination—just very old dust."

Kirk turned back to the girl. "Young lady—by the way, what's your name?"

"Miri."

"All right, Miri, you said the grups did something. Burning, hurting people. Why?"

"They did it when they started to get sick. We had to hide." She looked up hopefully at Kirk. "Am I doing it right? Is it the right foolie?"

"You're doing fine. You said the grownups got sick. Did they die?"

"Grups always die." Put that way, it was of course self-evident, but it didn't seem to advance the questioning much.

"How about the children?"

"The onlies? Of course not. We're here, aren't we?"

"More of them?" McCoy put in. "How many?"

"All there are."

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "take the security guards and see if you can find any more survivors,.. So all the grups are gone?"

"Well, until it happens—you know—when *it* happens to an only. Then you get to be like them. You want to hurt people, like they did."

"Miri," McCoy said, "somebody attacked us, outside. You saw that? Was that a grup?"

"That was Floyd," she said, shivering a little. "It happened to him. He turned into one. It's happening to me, too. That's why I can't hang around with my friends any more. The minute one of us starts changing, the rest get afraid… I don't like your foolie. It's no fun."

"What do they get afraid of?" Kirk persisted.

"You saw Floyd. They try to hurt everything. First you get those awful marks on your skin. Then you turn into a grup, and you want to hurt people, kill people."

"We're not like that," Kirk said. "We've come a long way, all the way from the stars. We know a good many things. Maybe we can help you, if you'll help us."

"Grups don't help," Miri said. "They're the ones that did this."

"We didn't do it, and we want to change it. Maybe we can, if you'll trust us."

Janice touched her on the side of the face and said, "Please?" After a long moment, Miri managed her first timid smile.

Before she could speak, however, there was a prolonged rattling and clanking sound from outside, as though someone had emptied a garbage can off a rooftop. It was followed by the wasplike snarl of a phaser bolt.

Far away, and seemingly high up a child's voice called: "Nyah nyah nyah nyah. NYAH, Nyah!"

"Guards!" Spock's voice shouted.

Many voices answered, as if from all sides: "Nyah nyah nyah nyah NYAH, nyah!"

Then there was silence, except for the echoes.

"It seems," Kirk said, "that your friends don't want to be found."

"Maybe that's not the first step anyhow, Jim," McCoy said. "Whatever happened here, somewhere there must be records about it. If we're to do anything, we have to put our fingers on the cause. The best place would probably be the local public health center. What about that, Miri? Is there a place where the doctors used to work? Maybe a government building?"

"I know that place," she said distastefully. "Them and their needles. That's a bad place. None of us go there."

"But that's where we have to go," Kirk said. "It's important if we're to help you. Please take us."

He held out his hand, and, very hesitantly, she took it. She looked up at him with something like the beginnings of wonder.

"Jim is a nice name," she said. "I like it."

"I like yours, too. And I like you."

"I know you do. You can't really be a grup. You're—something different." She smiled and stood up, gracefully. As she did so, she looked down, and he felt her grip stiffen. Then, carefully, she disengaged it.

"Oh!" she said in a choked voice. "Already!"

He looked down too, already more than half aware of what he would see. Across the back of his hand was a sprawling blue blotch, about the size of a robin's egg.

The laboratory proved to be well-equipped, and since it had been sealed and was windowless, there was less than the expected coating of dust on the tables and equipment. Its size and lack of windows also made it seem unpleasantly like the inside of a tomb, but nobody was prepared to complain about that; Kirk was only grateful that its contents had proved unattractive to any looters who might have broken into it.

The blue blotches had appeared upon all of them now, although those on Mr Spock were the smallest and appeared to spread more slowly; that was to have been expected, since he came from far different stock than did the rest of the crew, or the colonists for that matter. Just as clearly, his nonterrestrial origin conferred no immunity on him, only a slight added resistance.

McCoy had taken biopsies from the lesions; some of the samples he stained, others he cultured on a variety of media. The blood-agar plate had produced a glistening, wrinkled blue colony which turned out to consist of active, fecund bacteria strongly resembling spirochetes. McCoy, however, was convinced that these were not the cause of the disease, but only secondary invaders.

"For one thing, they won't take on any of the lab animals I've had sent down from the ship," he said, "which means I can't satisfy Koch's Postulates. Second, there's an abnormally high number of mitotic figures in the stained tissues, and the whole appearance is about halfway between squamous metaplasia and frank neoplasm. Third, the choromosome table shows so many displacements…"

"Whoa, I'm convinced," Kirk protested. "What does it add up to?"

"I think the disease proper is caused by a virus," McCoy said. "The spirochetes may help, of course; there's an Earthly disease called Vincent's angina that's produced by two micro-organisms working in concert."

"Is the spirochete communicable?"

"Highly, by contact. You and Yeoman Rand got yours from Miri; we got them from you two."

"Then I'd better see that no one else does," Kirk said. He told his communicator: "Kirk to *Enterprise.* No one, repeat, no one, under any circumstances, is to transport down here until further notice. The planet is heavily infected. Set up complete decontamination procedures for any of us who return."

"Computer?" McCoy nudged.

"Oh yes. Also, ship us down the biggest portable bio-computer—the cat-brain job. That's to get the live-steam treatment too when it goes back up."

"Captain," Spock called. He had been going through a massed rank of file cabinets which occupied almost all of one wall. Now he was beckoning, a folder in one hand. "I think we've got something here."

They all went over except McCoy, who remained at the microscope. Spock handed the folder to Kirk and began pulling others. "There's a drawer-full of these. Must have been hundreds of people working on it. No portable bio-comp is going to process this mass of data in anything under a year."

"Then we'll feed the stuff to the ship's computer by communicator," Kirk said. He looked down at the folder.

It was headed:

Progress Report
LIFE PROLONGATION PROJECT
Genetics Section

"So *that's* what it was," Janice Rand said.

"We don't know yet," Kirk said. "But if it was, it must have been the galaxy's biggest backfire. All right, let's get to work. Miri, you can help too: lay out these folders on the long table there by categories—one for genetics, one for virology, one for immunology, or whatever. Never mind what the words mean, just match 'em up."

The picture merged with maddening slowness. The general principle was clear almost from the start: an attempt to counter the aging process by selectively repairing mutated body cells. Aging is primarily the accumulation in the body of cells whose

normal functions have been partly damaged by mutations, these in turn being caused by the entrance of free radicals into the cell nucleus, thus deranging the genetic code. The colony's scientists had known very well that there was no blocking out the free radicals, which are created everywhere in the environment, by background radiation, by sunlight, by combustion, and even by digestion. Instead, they proposed to create a self-replicating, viruslike substance which would remain passive in the bloodstream until actual cell damage occurred; the virus would then penetrate the cell and replace the damaged element. The injection would be given at birth, before the baby's immunity mechanism was fully in action, so that is would be "selfed"—that is, marked as a substance normal to the body rather than an invader to be battled; but it would remain inactive until triggered by the hormones of puberty, so as not to interfere with normal growth processes.

"As bold a project as I've heard of in all my life," McCoy declared. "Just incidentally, had this thing worked, it would have been the perfect cancer preventive. Cancer is essentially just a local explosion of the aging process, in an especially virulent form."

"But it didn't work," Spock said. "Their substance was entirely *too* much like a virus—and it got away from them. Oh, it prolongs life, all right—but only in children. When puberty finally sets in, it kills them."

"How much?" Janice Rand asked.

"You mean, how long does it prolong life? We don't know because the experiment hasn't gone on that long. All we know is the rate: the injected person ages about a month, physiological time, for every hundred years, objective time. For the children, it obviously does work that way."

Janice stared at Miri. "A month in a hundred years!" she said. "And the experiment was three centuries ago! Eternal childhood… It's like a dream."

"A very bad dream, Yeoman," Kirk said. "We learn through example and responsibilities. Miri and her friends were deprived of both. It's a dead end street."

"With a particularly ugly death at the end," McCoy agreed. "It's amazing that so many children did survive. Miri, how did you get along after all the grups died?"

"We had foolies," Miri said. "We had fun. There wasn't anybody to tell us not to. And when we got hungry, we just took something. There were lots of things in cans, and lots of mommies."

"Mommies?"

"You know." Miri wound her hand vigorously in mid-air, imitating the motion of a rotary can-opener. Janice Rand choked and turned away. "Jim… now that you found what you were looking for… are you going away?"

"Oh no," Kirk said. "We've still got a great deal more to learn. Your grups seemed to have done their experiments in a certain definite sequence, a sort of timetable. Any sign of that yet, Mr Spock?"

"No, sir. Very likely it's kept somewhere else. If this were my project, I'd keep it in a vault; it's the key to the whole business."

"I'm afraid I agree. And unless we can figure it out, Miri, we won't be able to identify the virus, synthesize it, and make a vaccine."

"That's good," Miri said. "Your not going, I mean. We could have fun—until *it* happens."

"We still may be able to stop it. Mr Spock, I gather you couldn't get close to any of the other children?"

"No chance. They know the area too well. Like mice."

"All right, let's try another approach. Miri, will you help us find some of them?"

"You won't find any," Miri said positively. "They're afraid. They won't like you. And they're afraid of me, too, now, ever since..." she stopped.

"We'll try to make them understand."

"Onlies?" the girl said. "You couldn't do it. That's the best thing about being an only. Nobody expects you to understand."

"*You* understand."

Abruptly Miri's eyes filled with tears. "I'm not an only anymore," she said. She ran out of the room. Janice looked after her compassionately.

Janice said: "That little girl…"

"…is three hundred years older than you are, Yeoman," Kirk finished for her. "Don't leap to any conclusions. It's got to make some sort of a difference in her—whether we can see it yet or not."

But in a minute Miri was back, the cloudburst passed as if it had never been, looking for something to do, Mr Spock set her to sharpening pencils, of which the ancient laboratory seemed to have scores. She set to it cheerfully—but throughout, her eyes never left Kirk. He tried not to show that he was aware of it.

"Captain? This is Farrell on the *Enterprise. We*'re ready to compute."

"All right, stand by. Mr Spock, what do you need?"

Miri held up a fistful of pencils. "Are these enough?"

"Uh? Oh—we could use more, if you don't mind."

"Oh no, Jim," she said. "Why should I mind?"

"This fellow," Spock said, fanning out a sheaf of papers on the table, "left these notes in the last weeks-after the disaster began. I disregarded these last entries; he said he was too far gone himself, too sick, to be sure he wasn't delirious, and I agree. But these earlier tables ought to show us how much time we have left. By the way, it's clear that the final stages we've seen here are typical. Homicidal mania."

"And nothing to identify the virus strain—or its chemistry?" McCoy said.

"Not a thing," Spock said. "He believed somebody else was writing that report. Maybe somebody was and we just haven't found it yet—or maybe that was the first of his hallucinations. Anyhow, the first overt stage is intense fever… pain in the joints… fuzziness of vision. Then, gradually, the mania takes over. By the way, Dr McCoy, you were right about the spirochetes—they do contribute. They create the mania, not the virus. It'll be faster in us because we haven't carried the disease in latent form as long as Miri."

"What about her?" Kirk said in a low voice.

"Again, we'll have to see what the computer says. Roughly, I'd guess that she could survive us by five or six weeks—if one of us doesn't kill her first…"

"Enough now?" Miri said simultaneously, holding up more pencils.

"No!" Kirk burst out angrily.

The corners of her mouth turned down and her lower lip protruded. "Well, all right, Jim," she said in a small voice. "I didn't mean to make you mad."

"I'm sorry, Miri. I wasn't talking to you. I'm not mad." He turned back to Spock. "All right, so we still don't know what we're fighting. Feed your figures to Farrell and then at least we'll know what the time factor is. Damnation! If we could just put our hands on that virus, the ship could develop a vaccine for us in twenty-four hours. But there's just no starting point."

"Maybe there is," McCoy said slowly. "Again, it'd be a massive computational project, but I think it might work. Jim, you know how the desk-bound mind works. If this lab was like every other government project I've run across, it had to have order forms in quintuplicate for everything it used. Somewhere here there ought to be an accounting file containing copies of those orders. They'd show us what the consumption of given reagents was at different times. I'll be able to spot the obvious routine items—culture media and shelf items, things like that—but we'll need to analyze for what is significant. There's at least a chance that such an analysis would reconstruct the missing timetable."

"A truly elegant idea," Mr Spock said. "The question is…"

He was interrupted by the buzzing of Kirk's communicator.

"Kirk here."

"Farrell to landing party. Mr Spock's table yields a cut-off point at seven days."

For a long moment there was no sound but the jerky whirring of the pencil sharpener. Then Spock said evenly: "That was the question I was about to raise. As much as I admire Dr McCoy's scheme, it will almost surely require more time than we have left."

"Not necessarily," McCoy said. "If it's true that the spirochete creates the mania, we can possibly knock it out with antibiotics and keep our minds clear for at least a while longer…"

Something hit the floor with a smash. Kirk whirled. Janice Rand had been cleaning some of McCoy's slides in a beaker of chromic acid. The corrosive yellow stuff was now all over the floor. Some of it had spattered Janice's legs. Grabbing a wad of cotton, Kirk dropped to his knees to mop them.

"No, no," Janice sobbed. "You can't help me—you can't help me!"

Stumbling past McCoy and Spock, she ran out of the laboratory, sobbing. Kirk started after her.

"Stay here," he said. "Keep working. Don't lose a minute."

Janice was standing in the hallway, her back turned, weeping convulsively. Kirk resumed swabbing her legs, trying not to notice the ugly blue blotches marring them. As he worked, her tears gradually died back. After a while she said in a small voice: "Back on the ship you never noticed my legs."

Kirk forced a chuckle. "The burden of command, Yeoman: to see only what regs say is pertinent… That's better, but soap and water will have to be next."

He stood up. She looked worn, but no longer hysterical. She said: "Captain, I didn't really want to do that."

"I know," Kirk said. "Forget it."

"It's so stupid, such a waste… Sir, do you know all I can think about? I should know better, but I keep thinking, I'm only twenty-four—and I'm scared."

"I'm a little older, Yeoman. But I'm scared too."

"You are?"

"Of course. I don't want to become one of those things, any more than you do. I'm more than scared. You're my people. I brought you here. I'm scared for all of us."

"You don't show it," she whispered. "You never show it. You always seem to be braver than any ten of us."

"Baloney," he said roughly. "Only an idiot isn't afraid when there's *something* to be afraid of. The man who feels no fear isn't brave, he's just stupid. Where courage comes in is in going ahead and coping with danger, not being paralyzed by fright. And especially, not letting yourself be panicked by the other guy."

"I draw the moral," Janice said, trying to pull herself erect. But at the same time, the tears started coming quietly again. "I'm sorry," she repeated in a strained voice. "When we get back, sir, you'd better put in for a dry-eyed Yeoman."

"Your application for a transfer is refused." He put his arm around her gently, and she tried to smile up at him. The movement turned them both around toward the entrance to the lab.

Standing in it was Miri, staring at them with her fists crammed into her mouth, her eyes wide with an unfathomable mixture of emotions—amazement, protest, hatred even? Kirk could not tell. As he started to speak, Miri whirled about and was gone. He could hear her running footsteps receding; then silence.

"Troubles never come alone," Kirk said resignedly. "We'd better go back."

"Where was Miri going?" McCoy asked interestedly, the moment they re-entered. "She seemed to be in a hurry."

"I don't know. Maybe to try and look for more onlies. Or maybe she just got bored with us. We haven't time to worry about her. What's next?"

"Next is accident prevention time," McCoy said. "I should have thought of it before, but Janice's accident reminded me of it. There are a lot of corrosive reagents around here, and if we have any

luck, we'll soon be playing with infectious material too. I want everyone out of their regular clothes and into lab uniforms we can shuck the minute they get something spilled on them. There's a whole locker full of them over on that side. All our own clothes go out of the lab proper into the anteroom, or else we'll just have to burn 'em when we get back to the ship."

"Good; so ordered. How about equipment—phasers and so on?"

"Keep one phaser here for emergencies if you're prepared to jettison it before we go back," McCoy said. "Everything else, out."

"Right. Next?"

"Medical analysis has got as far as I can take it," McCoy said. "From here on out, it's going to be strictly statistical—and though the idea was mine, I'm afraid Mr Spock is going to have to direct it. Statistics make me gibber."

Kirk grinned. "Very well, Mr Spock, take over."

"Yes sir. First of all, we've got to find those purchase orders. Which means another search of the file cabinets."

The problem was simple to pose: Invent a disease.

The accounting records turned up, relatively promptly, and in great detail. McCoy's assumption had been right that far: the bureaucratic mind evidently underwent no substantial change simply by having been removed more than a dozen light-years from the planet where it had evolved. Everything the laboratory had ever had to call for had at least three pieces of paper that went along with it.

McCoy was able to sort these into rough categories of significance, on a scale of ten (from 0 = obvious nonsense to 10 = obviously crucial), and the bio-comp coded everything graded "five" or above so that it could be fed to the orbiting *Enterprise's* computer with the least possible loss of time. The coding was very fast; but as signing relative weights to the items to be coded was a matter for human judgment, and despite his disclaimers, McCoy was the only man present who could do it with any confidence in well more than half of the instances. Spock could tell, within a given run of samples, what appeared to be statistically significant, but only McCoy could then guess whether the associations were medical, financial, or just make-work.

It took two days, working around the clock. By the morning of the third day, however, Spock was able to say: "These cards now hold everything the bio-comp can do for us." He turned to Miri, who had returned the day before, with no explanations, but without the slightest change in her manner, and as willing to work

as ever. "Miri, if you'll just stack them and put them back in that hopper, we'll rank them for the *Enterprise,* and then we can read-and-feed to Farrell. I must confess, I still don't see the faintest trace of a pattern in them."

"I do," McCoy said surprisingly. "Clearly the active agent can't be a pure virus, because it'd be cleaned out of the body between injection and puberty if it didn't reproduce; and true viruses can't reproduce without invading a body cell, which this thing is forbidden to do for some ten or twelve years, depending on the sex of the host. This has to be something more like some of the rickettsiae, with some enyzmatic mechanisms intact so it can feed and reproduce from material it can absorb from the body fluids, *outside* the cells. When the hormones of puberty hit it, it sheds that part of its organization and becomes a true virus. Ergo, the jettisoned mechanism has to be steroid-soluble. And only the sexual steroids can be involved. All these conditions close in on it pretty implacably, step by step."

"Close enough to put a name to it?" Kirk demanded tensely.

"By no means," McCoy said. "I don't even know if I'm on the right track; this whole scholium is intuitive on my part. But it makes sense. I think something very like that will emerge when the ship's computer processes all these codes. Anybody care to bet?"

"We've already bet our lives, like it or not," Kirk said. "But we ought to have the answer in an hour now. Mr Spock, call Farrell."

Spock nodded and went out into the anteroom, now kept sealed off from the rest of the lab. He was back in a moment. Though his face was almost incapable of showing emotion, something in his look brought Kirk to his feet in a rush.

"What's the matter?"

"The communicators are gone, Captain. There's nothing in those uniforms but empty pockets."

Janice gasped. Kirk turned to Miri, feeling his brows knotting together. The girl shrank a little from him, but returned his look defiantly all the same.

"What do you know about this, Miri?"

"The onlies took them, I guess," she said. "They like to steal things. It's a foolie."

"Where did they take them?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. That's a foolie, too. When you take something, you go someplace else."

He was on her in two strides, grasping her by the shoulders. "This is not a foolie. It's a disaster. We have to have those communicators—otherwise we'll never lick this disease."

She giggled suddenly. "Then you won't have to go," she said.

"No, we'll die. Now cut it out. Tell us where they are."

The girl drew herself up in an imitation of adult dignity. Considering that she had never seen an adult after the disaster until less than a week ago, it was a rather creditable imitation.

"Please, Captain, you're hurting me," she said haughtily. "What's the matter with you? How could *I* possibly know?"

Unfortunately, the impersonation broke at the end into another giggle—which, however, did Kirk no good as far as the issue at hand was concerned. "What is this, blackmail?" Kirk said, beyond anger now. He could feel nothing but the total urgency of the loss. "It's your life that's at stake too, Miri."

"Oh no," Miri said sweetly. "Mr Spock said that I'd live five or six weeks longer than you will. Maybe some of you'll die ahead of some others. I'll still be here." She flounced in her rags toward the door. Under any other circumstances she might have been funny, perhaps even charming. At the last moment she turned, trailing a languid hand through the air. "Of course I don't know what makes you think I know anything about this. But maybe if you're very nice to me, I could ask my friends some questions. In the meantime, Captain, farewell."

There was an explosion of pent breaths as her footsteps dwindled.

"Well," McCoy said, "one can tell that they had television on this planet during part of Miri's lifetime, at least."

The grim joke broke part of the tension.

"What can we do without the ship?" Kirk demanded. "Mr Spock?"

"Very little, Captain. The bio-comp's totally inadequate for this kind of job. It takes hours, where the ship's computer takes seconds, and it hasn't the analytical capacity."

"The human brain was around long before there were computers. Bones, what about your hunch?"

"I'll ride it, of course," McCoy said wearily. "But time is the one commodity the computer could have saved us, and the one thing we haven't got. When I think of that big lumbering ship up there, with everything we need on board it, orbiting around and around like so much inert metal…"

"And complaining just wastes more time," Kirk snarled. McCoy stared at him in surprise. "I'm sorry, Bones. I guess it's starting to get me; too."

"I *was* complaining," McCoy said. "The apology is mine. Well then, the human brain it will have to be. It worked for Pasteur… but he was a good bit smarter than me. Mr Spock, take those cards away from that dumb cat and let's restack them. I'll want to try a DNA analysis first. If that makes any sort of reasonable pattern, enough to set up a plausible species, we'll chew through them again and see if we can select out a clone."

"I'm not following you," Spock admitted.

"I'll feed you the codes, there's no time for explanations. Pull everything coded LTS-426 first. Then we'll ask the cat to sort those for uncoded common factors. There probably won't be any, but it's the most promising beginning I can think of."

"Right."

Kirk felt even more out of it than Mr Spock; he had neither the medical nor the statistical background to understand what was going on. He simply stood by, and did what little donkey-work there was to do.

The hours wore away into another day. Despite the stim-pills McCoy doled out, everyone seemed to be moving very slowly, as if underwater. It was like a nightmare of flight.

Somewhere during that day, Miri turned up, to watch with what she probably imagined was an expression of aloof amusement. Everyone ignored her. The expression gradually faded into a frown; finally, she began to tap her foot.

"Stop that," Kirk said without even turning to look at her, "or I'll break your infant neck."

The tapping stopped. McCoy said: "Once more into the cat, Mr Spock. We are now pulling all T's that are functions of D-2. If there are more than three, we're sunk."

The bio-comp hummed and chuttered over the twenty-two cards Spock had fed it. It threw out just one. McCoy leaned back in his hard-backed straight chair with a whoosh of satisfaction.

"Is that it?" Kirk asked.

"By no means, Jim. That's *probably* the virus involved. Just probably, no more."

"It's only barely significant," Spock said. "If this were a test on a new product survey or something of that sort, I'd throw it out without a second thought. But as matters stand…"

"As matters stand, we next have to synthesize the virus," McCoy said, "and then make a killed-virus vaccine from it. No, no, that won't work at all, what's the matter with me? Not a vaccine. An antitoxoid. Much harder. Jim, wake those security guards—a lot of good they did us in the pinch! We are going to need a lot of bottles washed in the next forty-eight hours."

Kirk wiped his forehead. "Bones, I'm feeling outright lousy, and I'm sure you are too. Officially we've got the forty-eight hours left—but are we going to be functioning sensibly after the next twenty-four?"

"We either fish or cut bait," McCoy said calmly. "All hands on their feet. The cookery class is hereby called to order."

"It's a shame," Spock said, "that viruses aren't as easy to mix as metaphors."

At this point Kirk knew that he was on the thin edge of hysteria. Somehow he had the firm impression that Mr Spock had just made a joke. Next he would be beginning to believe that there really was such a thing as a portable computer with a cat's brain in it. "Somebody hand me a bottle to wash," he said, "before I go to sleep on my feet."

By the end of twenty hours, Janice Rand was raving and had to be strapped down and given a colossal tranquilizer dose before she would stop fighting. One of the guards followed her down an hour later. Both were nearly solid masses of blue marks; evidently, the madness grew as the individual splotches coalesced into larger masses and proceeded toward covering the whole skin surface.

Miri disappeared at intervals, but she managed to be on the scene for both these collapses. Perhaps she was trying to look knowing, or superior, or amused; Kirk could not tell. The fact of the matter was that he no longer had to work to ignore Miri, he was so exhausted that the small chores allotted him by his First Officer and his ship's surgeon took up the whole foreground of his attention, and left room for no background at all.

Somewhere in there, McCoy's voice said: "Everything under the SPF hood now. At the next stage we've got a live one. Kirk, when I take the lid off the Petri dish, in goes the two cc's of formalin. Don't miss."

"I won't."

Somehow, he didn't. Next, after a long blank, he was looking at a rubber-capped ampule filled with clear liquid, into which McCoy's hands were inserting the needle of a spray hypo. Tunnel vision; nothing more than that: the ampule, the hypo, the hands.

"That's either the antitoxoid," McCoy's voice was saying from an infinite distance, "or it isn't. For all I know it may be pure poison. Only the computer could tell us which for sure."

"Janice first," Kirk heard himself rasp. "Then the guard. They're the closest to terminal."

"I override you, Captain," McCoy's voice said. "I am the only experimental animal in this party."

The needle jerked out of the rubber cap. Somehow, Kirk managed to reach out and grasp McCoy's only visible wrist. The movement hurt; his joints ached abominably, and so did his head.

"Wait a minute," he said. "One minute more won't make any difference."

He swivelled his ringing skull until Miri came into view down the optical tunnel. She seemed to be all fuzzed out at the edges. Kirk walked toward her, planting his feet with extraordinary care on the slowly tilting floor.

"Miri," he said. "Listen to me. You've got to listen to me."

She turned her head away. He reached out and grabbed her by the chin, much more roughly than he had wanted to, and forced her to look at him. He was dimly aware that he was anything but pretty—bearded, covered with sweat and dirt, eyes rimmed and netted with red, mouth working with the effort to say words that would not come out straight.

"We've… only got a few hours left. Us, and all of you… you, and your friends. And… we may be wrong. After that, no grups, and no onlies… no one… forever and ever. Give me back just one of those… machines, those communicators. Do you want the blood of a whole world on your hands? Think, Miri—think for once in your life!"

Her eyes darted away. She was looking toward Janice. He forced her to look back at him. "Now, Miri. Now. *Now.*"

She drew a long, shuddering breath. "I'll… try to get you one," she said. Then she twisted out of his grasp and vanished.

"We can't wait any longer," McCoy's voice said calmly. "Even if we had the computer's verdict, we couldn't do anything with it. We have to go ahead."

"I will bet you a year's pay," Spock said, "that the antitoxoid is fatal in itself."

In a haze of pain, Kirk could see McCoy grinning tightly, like a skull. "You're on," he said. "The disease certainly is. But if I lose, Mr Spock, how will you collect?"

He raised his hand.

"Stop!" Kirk croaked. He was too late—even supposing that McCoy in this last extremity would have obeyed his captain. This was McCoy's world, his universe of discourse. The hypo hissed against the surgeon's bared, blue-suffused arm.

Calmly, McCoy laid the injector down on the table, and sat down. "Done," he said. "I don't feel a thing." His eyes rolled upward in their sockets, and he took a firm hold on the edge of the table. "You see… gentlemen… it's all perfectly..."

His head fell forward.

"Help me carry him," Kirk said, in a dead voice. Together, he and Spock carried the surgeon to the nearest cot. McCoy's face, except for the botches, was waxlike; he looked peaceful for the first time in days. Kirk sat down on the edge of the cot beside him and tried his pulse. It was wild and erratic, but still there.

"I… don't see how the antitoxoid could have hit him that fast," Spock said. His own voice sounded like a whisper from beyond the grave.

"He could only have passed out. I'm about ready, myself. Damn the man's stubbornness."

"Knowledge," Spock said remotely, "has its privileges."

This meant nothing to Kirk. Spock was full of these gnomic utterances; presumably they were Vulcanian. There was a peculiar hubbub in Kirk's ears, as though the visual fuzziness was about to be counterpointed by an aural one.

Spock said, "I seem to be on the verge myself—closer than I thought. The hallucinations have begun."

Wearily, Kirk looked around. Then he goggled. If Spock was having a hallucination, so was Kirk. He wondered if it was the same one.

A procession of children was coming into the room, led by Miri. They were of all sizes and shapes, from toddlers up to about the age of twelve. They looked as though they had been living in a department store. Some of the older boys wore tuxedos; some were in military uniforms; some in scaled-down starmen's clothes; some in very loud and mismatched sports clothes. The girls were a somewhat better matched lot, since almost all of them were wearing some form of party dress, several of them trailing opera cloaks and loaded with jewelry. Dominating them all was a tall, red-headed boy—or no, that wasn't his own hair, it was a wig, long at the back and sides and with bangs, from which the price-tag

still dangled. Behind him hopped a fat little boy who was carrying, on a velvet throw-pillow, what appeared to be a crown.

It was like some mad vision of the Children's Crusade. But what was maddest about it was that the children were loaded with equipment—the landing party's equipment. There were the three communicators—Janice and the security guards hadn't carried any; there were the two missing tricorders—McCoy had kept his in the lab; and the red-wigged boy even had a phaser slung at his hip. It was a measure of how exhausted they had all been, even back then, that they hadn't realized one of the deadly objects was missing. Kirk wondered whether the boy had tried it, and if so, whether he had hurt anybody with it.

The boy saw him looking at it, and somehow divined his thought.

"I used it on Louise," he said gravely. "I had to. She went grup all at once, while we were playing school. She was only a little older than me."

He unbuckled the weapon and held it out: Numbly, Kirk took it. The other children moved to the long table and solemnly began to pile the rest of the equipment on it. Miri came tentatively to Kirk.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It was wrong and I shouldn't have. I had a hard time, trying to make Jahn understand that it wasn't a foolie any more." She looked sideways at the waxy figure of McCoy. "Is it too late?"

"It may be," Kirk whispered; that was all the voice he could muster. "Mr Spock, do you think you can still read the data to Farrell?"

"I'll try, sir."

Farrell was astonished and relieved, and demanded explanations. Spock cut him short and read him the figures. Then there was nothing to do but wait while the material was processed. Kirk went back to looking at McCoy, and Miri joined him. He realized dimly that, for all the trouble she had caused, her decision to bring the communicators back had been a giant step toward growing up. It would be a shame to lose her now, Miri most of all in the springtime of her promise—a springtime for which she had waited three sordid centuries. He put his arm around her, and she looked up at him gratefully.

Was it another failure of vision, or were the blotches on McCoy fading a little? No, some of them were definitely smaller and had lost color. "Mr Spock," he said, "come here and check me on something."

Spock looked and nodded. "Retreating," he said. "Now if there are no serious side-effects—" The buzz of his communicator interrupted him. "Spock here."

"Farrell to landing party. The identification is correct, repeat, correct. Congratulations. Do you mean to tell me you boiled down all that mass of bits and pieces with nothing but a bio-comp?"

Kirk and Spock exchanged tired grins. "No," Spock said, "we did it all in Doctor McCoy's head. Over and out."

"The bio-comp did help," Kirk said. He reached out and patted the squat machine. "Nice kitty."

McCoy stirred. He was trying to sit up, his expression dazed.

"Begging your pardon, Doctor," Kirk said. "If you've rested sufficently, I believe the administration of injections *is* your department."

"It worked?" McCoy said huskily.

"It worked fine, the ship's computer says it's the right stuff, and you are the hero of the hour, you pig-headed idiot."

They left the system a week later, having given all the antitoxoid the ship's resources could produce. Together with Farrell, the erstwhile landing party stood on the bridge of the *Enterprise,* watching the planet retreat.

"I'm still a little uneasy about it," Janice Rand said. "No matter how old they are chronologically, they're still just children. And to leave them there with just a medical team to help them…"

"They haven't lived all those years for nothing," Kirk said. "Look at the difficult thing Miri did. They'll catch on fast, with only a minimum of guidance. Besides, I've already had Lieutenant Uhura get the word back to Earth… If that planet had had subspace radio, they would have been saved a lot of their agony. But it hadn't been invented when the original colonists left… Space Central will send teachers, technicians, administrators…"

"…And truant officers, I presume," McCoy said.

"No doubt. The kids will be all right."

Janice Rand said slowly: "Miri… she… really loved you, you know, Captain. That was why she played that trick on you."

"I know," Kirk said. "And I'm duly flattered. But I'll tell you a secret, Yeoman Rand. I make it a policy never to get involved with women older than I am."

THE CONSCIENCE OF THE KING

(Barry Trivers)

"A curious experience," Kirk said. "I've seen *Macbeth* in everything from bearskins to uniforms, but never before in Arcturian dress. I suppose an actor has to adapt to all kinds of audiences."

"This one has," Dr Leighton said. He exchanged a glance with Martha Leighton; there was an undertone in his voice which Kirk could not fathom. There seemed to be no reason for it. The Leightons' garden, under the bright sun of the Arcturian system, was warm and pleasant; their hospitality, including last night's play, had been unexceptionable. But time was passing, and old friends or no, Kirk had to be back on duty shortly.

"Karidian has an enormous reputation," he said, "and obviously he's earned it. But now, Tom, we'd better get down to business. I've been told this new synthetic of yours is something we badly need."

"There is no synthetic," Leighton said heavily. "I want you to think about Karidian. About his voice in particular. You should remember it; you were there."

"I was where?" Kirk said, annoyed. "At the play?"

"No," Leighton said, his crippled, hunched body stiring restlessly in its lounger. "On Tarsus IV, during the Rebellion. Of course it was twenty years ago, but you couldn't have forgotten. My family murdered—and your friends. And you saw Kodos—and heard him, too."

"Do you mean to tell me," Kirk said slowly, "that you called me three light-years off my course just to accuse an actor of being Kodos the Executioner? What am I supposed to put in my log? That you lied? That you diverted a starship with false information?"

"It's not false. Karidian is Kodos."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about your invented story about the synthetic food process. Anyhow, Kodos is dead."

"Is he?" Leighton said. "A body burned beyond recognition—what kind of evidence is that? And there are so few witnesses left, Jim: you, and I, and perhaps six or seven others, people who actually saw Kodos and heard his voice. You may have forgotten, but I never will."

Kirk turned to Martha, but she said gently: "I can't tell him anything, Jim. Once he heard Karidian's voice, it all came back. I can hardly blame him. From all accounts, that was a bloody business— and Tom wasn't just a witness. He was a victim."

"No, I know that," Kirk said. "But vengeance won't help, either—and I can't allow the whole *Enterprise* to be sidetracked on a personal vendetta, no matter how I feel about it."

"And what about justice?" Leighton said. "If Kodos is still alive, oughtn't he to pay? Or at least be taken out of circulation—before he contrives another massacre? Four thousand people, Jim!"

"You have a point," Kirk admitted reluctantly. "All right, I'll go this far: Let me check the ship's library computer and see what we have on *both* men. If your notion's just a wild hare, that's probably the quickest way to find out. If it isn't—well, I'll listen further."

"Fair enough," Leighton said.

Kirk pulled out his communicator and called the *Enterprise.* "Library computer… Give me everything you have on a man named or known as Kodos the Executioner. After that, a check on an actor named Anton Karidian."

"Working," the computer's voice said. Then: "Kodos the Executioner. Deputy Commander, forces of Rebellion, Tarsus IV, twenty terrestrial years ago. Population of eight thousand Earth colonists struck by famine after fungus blight largely destroyed food supply. Kodos used situation to implement private theories of eugenics, slaughtered fifty per cent of colony population. Sought by Earth forces when rebellion overcome. Burned body found and case closed. Biographical data…"

"Skip that," Kirk said. "Go on."

"Karidian, Anton. Director and leading man of traveling company of actors, sponsored by Interstellar Cultural Exchange project. Touring official installations for past nine years. Daughter, Lenore, nineteen years old, now leading lady of troupe. Karidian a recluse, has given notice current tour is to be his last. Credits…"

"Skip that too. Data on his pre-acting years?"

"None available. That is total information." Kirk put the communicator away slowly. "Well, well," he said. "I still think it's

probably a wild hare, Tom… but I think I'd better go to tonight's performance, too."

After the performance, Kirk went backstage, which was dingy and traditional, and knocked on the door with the star on it. In a moment, Lenore Karidian opened it, still beautiful, though not as bizarre as she had looked as an Arcturian Lady Macbeth. She raised her eyebrows.

"I saw your performance tonight," Kirk said. "And last night, too. I just want to… extend my appreciation to you and to Karidian."

"Thank you," she said, politely. "My father will be delighted, Mr…?"

"Captain James Kirk, starship *Enterprise.*"

That told, he could tell; that and the fact that he had seen the show two nights running. She said: "We're honored. I'll carry your message to father."

"Can't I see him personally?"

"I'm sorry, Captain Kirk. He sees no one personally."

"An actor turning away his admirers? That's very unusual."

"Karidian is an unusual man."

"Then I'll talk with Lady Macbeth," Kirk said. "If you've no objections. May I come in?"

"Why, of course." She moved out of the way. In side, the dressing room was a clutter of theatrical trunks, all packed and ready to be moved. "I'm sorry I have nothing to offer you."

Kirk stared directly at her, smiling. "You're being unnecessarily modest."

She smiled back. "As you see, everything is packed Next we play two performances on Benecia, if the *Astral Queen* can get us there; we leave tonight."

"She's a good ship," Kirk said. "Do you enjoy your work?"

"Mostly. But, to play the classics, in these times, when most people prefer absurd three-V serials, it isn't always as rewarding as it could be."

"But you continue," Kirk said.

"Oh yes," she said, with what seemed to be a trace of bitterness. "My father feels that we owe it to the public. Not that the public cares."

"They cared tonight. You were very convincing as Lady Macbeth."

"Thank you. And as Lenore Karidian?"

"I'm impressed." He paused an instant. "I think I'd like to see you again."

"Professionally?"

"Not necessarily."

"I think I'd like that. Unfortunately, we must keep to our schedule."

"Schedules aren't always as rigid as they seem," Kirk said. "Shall we see what happens?"

"Very well. And hope for the best."

The response was promising, if ambiguous, but Kirk had no chance to explore it further. Suddenly his communicator was beeping insistently.

"Excuse me," he said. "That's my ship calling. Kirk here."

"Spock calling, Captain. Something I felt you should know immediately. Dr Leighton is dead."

"Dead? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," Spock's voice said. "We just had word from Q Central. He was murdered—stabbed to death."

Slowly, Kirk put the device back in his hip pocket. Lenore was watching him. Her face showed nothing but grave sympathy.

"I'll have to go," he said. "Perhaps you'll hear from me later."

"I quite understand. I hope so."

Kirk went directly to the Leightons' apartment. The body was still there, unattended except by Martha, but it told him nothing; he was not an expert in such matters. He took Martha's hand gently.

"He really died the first day those players arrived," she said, very quietly. "Memory killed him. Jim, do you suppose survivors ever really recover from a tragedy?"

"I'm deeply sorry, Martha."

"He was convinced the moment we saw that man arrive," she said. "Twenty years since the terror, but he was sure Karidian was the man. Is that possible, Jim? Is he Kodos, after all?"

"I don't know. But I'm trying to find out."

"Twenty years and he still had nightmares. I'd wake him and he'd tell me he still heard the screams of the innocent—the silence of the executed. They never told him what happened to the rest of his family."

"I'm afraid there's not much doubt about that," Kirk said.

"It's the not knowing, Jim—whether the people you love are dead or alive. When you know, you mourn, but the wound heals and you go on. When you don't, every dawn is a funeral. That's what killed my husband, Jim, not the knife. But with him, I know."

She managed a small smile and Kirk squeezed her hand convulsively. "It's all right," she said, as if she were the one who had to do the comforting. "At least he has peace now. He never really had it before. I suppose we'll never know who killed him."

"I," Kirk said, "am damn well going to find out."

"It doesn't matter. I've had enough of all this passion for vengeance. It's time to let it all rest. More than time." Suddenly the tears welled up. "But I shan't forget him. Never."

Kirk stomped aboard ship in so obvious a white fury that nobody dared even to speak to him. Going directly to his quarters, he barked into the intercom: "Uhura!"

"Yes, Captain," the Communications Officer responded, her normally firm voice softened almost to a squeak.

"Put me through to Captain Daly, the *Astral Queen,* on orbit station. And put it on scramble."

"Yes, sir. He's on, sir."

"John, this is Jim Kirk. Can you do me a little favor?"

"I owe you a dozen," Daly's voice said. "And two dozen drinks, too. Name your poison."

"Thanks. I want you to pass up your pickup here."

"You mean strand all them actors?"

"Just that," Kirk said. "I'll take them on. And if there's any trouble, the responsibility is mine."

"Will do."

"I appreciate it. I'll explain later—I hope. Over and out. Lieutenant Uhura, now I want the library computer."

"Library."

"Reference the Kodos file. I'm told there were eight or nine survivors of the massacre who were actual eyewitnesses. I want

their names and status."

"Working. In order of age: Leighton, T., deceased. Molson, E., deceased…"

"Wait a minute, I want survivors."

"These were survivors of the massacre," the computer said primly. "The deceased are all recent murder victims, all cases open. Instructions."

Kirk swallowed. "Continue."

"Kirk, J., Captain, S.S. *Enterprise.* Wiegand, R., deceased. Eames, S., deceased. Daiken, R. Communications, S.S. *Enterprise*…"

"What!"

"Daiken, R., Communications, *Enterprise,* five years old at time of Kodos incident."

"All right, cut," Kirk said. "Uhura, get me Mr Spock. Mr Spock, arrange for a pickup for the Karidian troupe, to be recorded in the log as stranded, for transfer to their destination; company to present special performance for officers and crew. Next destination to be Eta Benecia; give me arrival time as soon as it's processed."

"Aye, aye, sir. What about the synthetic food samples we were supposed to pick up from Dr Leighton?"

"There aren't any, Mr Spock," Kirk said shortly.

"That fact will have to be noted, too. Diverting a starship is a serious business. Well, a black mark against Dr Leighton isn't going to hurt him now. One more thing, Mr Spock. I want the privacy of the Karidian company totally respected. They can have the freedom of the ship within the limits of regulations, but their quarters are off limits. Pass it on to all hands."

"Yes, sir." There was no emotion in Spock's voice; but then, there never was.

"Finally, Mr Spock, reference Lt. Robert Daiken, in Communications. Please have him transferred to Engineering."

"Sir," Spock said, "he came up from Engineering."

"I'm aware of that. I'm sending him back. He needs more experience."

"Sir, may I suggest a further explanation? He's bound to consider this transfer a disciplinary action."

"I can't help that," Kirk said curtly. "Execute. And notify me when the Karidians come aboard."

He paused and looked up at the ceiling, at last unable to resist a rather grim smile. "I think," he said, "I shall be taking the young lady on a guided tour of the ship."

There was quite a long silence. Then Spock said neutrally: "As you wish, sir."

At this hour, the engine room was empty, and silent except for the low throbbing of the great thrust units; the *Enterprise* was driving. Lenore looked around, and then smiled at Kirk.

"Did you order the soft lights especially for the occasion?" she said.

"I'd like to be able to say yes," Kirk said. "However, we try to duplicate conditions of night and day as much as possible. Human beings have a built-in diurnal rhythm; we try to adjust to it." He gestured at the hulking drivers. "You find this interesting?"

"Oh yes. All that power, and all under such complete control. Are you like that, Captain?"

"I hope I'm more of a man than a machine," he said.

"An intriguing combination of both. The power's at your command; but the decisions…"

"…come from a very human source."

"Are you sure?" she said. "Exceptional, yes; but human?"

Kirk said softly, "You can count on it."

There was a sound of footsteps behind them. Kirk turned reluctantly. It was Yeoman Rand, looking in this light peculiarly soft and blonde despite her uniform—and despite a rather severe expression. She held out an envelope.

"Excuse me, sir," she said. "Mr Spock thought you ought to have this at once."

"Quite so. Thank you." Kirk pocketed the envelope. "That will be all."

"Very good, sir." The girl left without batting an eyelash. Lenore watched her go, seemingly somewhat amused.

"A lovely girl," she said.

"And very efficient."

"Now *there's* a subject, Captain. Tell me about the women in your world. Has the machine changed them? Made them, well, just people, instead of women?"

"Not at all," Kirk said. "On this ship they have the same duties and functions as the men. They compete equally, and get no special privileges. But they're still women."

"I can see that. Especially the one who just left. So pretty. I'm afraid she didn't like me."

"Nonsense," Kirk said, rather more bluffly than he had intended. "You're imagining things. Yeoman Rand is all business."

Lenore looked down. "You are human, after all. Captain of a starship, and yet you know so little about women. Still I can hardly blame her."

"Human nature hasn't changed," Kirk said. "Grown, perhaps, expanded; but not changed."

"That's a comfort. To know that people can still feel, build a private dream, fall in love… all that, and power too! Like Caesar and Cleopatra."

She was moving steadily closer, by very small degrees. Kirk waited a moment, and then took her in his arms.

The kiss was warm and lingering. She was the first to draw out of it, looking up into his eyes, her expression half sultry, half mocking.

"I had to know," she whispered against the power hum. "I never kissed a Caesar before."

"A rehearsal, Miss Karidian?"

"A performance, Captain."

They kissed again, hard. Something crackled against Kirk's breast. After what seemed to be all too short awhile, he took her by the shoulders and pushed her gently away—not very far.

"Don't stop."

"I'm not stopping, Lenore. But I'd better see what it was that Spock thought was so important. He had orders not to know where I was."

"I see," she said, her voice taking on a slight edge. "Starship captains tell *before* they kiss. Well, go ahead and look at your note."

Kirk pulled out the envelope and ripped it open. The message was brief, pointed, very Spock-like. It said:

> SHIP'S OFFICER DAIKEN POISONED, CONDITION SERIOUS. Dr McCOY ANALYZING FOR CAUSE AND ANTIDOTE, REQUESTS YOUR PRESENCE.
>
> SPOCK

Lenore watched his face change. At last she said, "I see I've lost you. I hope not permanently."

"No, hardly permanently," Kirk said, trying to smile and failing. "But I should have looked at this sooner. Excuse me, please; and goodnight, Lady Macbeth,."

Spock and McCoy were in the sick bay when Kirk arrived. Daiken was on the table, leads running from his still, sweating form to the body function panel, which seemed to be quietly going crazy. Kirk flashed a glance over the panel, but it meant very little to him. He said: "Will he make it? What happened?"

"Somebody put tetralubisol in his milk," McCoy said. "A clumsy job; the stuff is poisonous, but almost insoluble, so it was easy to pump out. He's sick, but he has a good chance. More than I can say for you, Jim."

Kirk looked sharply at the surgeon, and then at Spock. They were both watching him like cats.

"Very well," he said. "I can see that I'm on the spot. Mr Spock, why don't you begin the lecture?"

"Daiken was the next to last witness of the Kodos affair," Spock said evenly. "You are the last. Dr McCoy and I checked the library, just as you did, and got the same information. We suppose you are courting Miss Karidian for more information, but the next attempt will be on you. Clearly, you and Daiken are the only survivors because you are both aboard the *Enterprise;* but if Dr Leighton was right, you no longer have that immunity, and the attempt on Daiken tends to confirm that. In short, you're inviting death."

"I've done that before," Kirk said tiredly. "If Karidian is Kodos, I mean to nail him down, that's all. Administering justice is part of my job."

"Are you certain that's all?" McCoy said.

"No, Bones, I'm not at all certain. Remember that I was there on Tarsus—a midshipman, caught up in a revolution. I saw women and children forced into a chamber with no exit, and a half-mad self-appointed messiah named Kodos throw a switch. And then there wasn't anyone inside any more. Four thousand people, dead, vanished, and I had to stand by, just waiting for my own turn. I can't forget it, any more than Leighton could. I thought I had, but I was wrong."

"And what if you decide Karidian is Kodos?" McCoy demanded. "What then? Do you carry his head" through the corridors in triumph? That won't bring back the dead."

"Of course it won't," Kirk said. "But they may rest easier."

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," Spock said, almost in a whisper. Both men turned to look at him in astonishment

At last Kirk said, "That's true, Mr Spock, whatever it may mean to an outworlder like you. Vengeance is not what I'm after. I am after justice—and prevention. Kodos killed four thousand; if he is still at large, he may massacre again. But consider this, too: Karidian is a human being, with rights like all of us. He deserves the same justice. If it's at all possible, he also deserves to be cleared."

"I don't know who's worse," McCoy said, looking from Spock to Kirk, "the human calculator or the captain-cum-mystic. Both of you go the hell away and leave me with my patient."

"Gladly," Kirk said. "I'm going to talk to Karidian, and never mind his rule against personal interviews. He can try to kill me if he likes, but he'll have to lay off my officers."

"In short," Spock said, "you *do* think Karidian is Kodos."

Kirk threw up his hands. "Of course I do, Mr Spock," he said. "Would I be making such an idiot of myself if I didn't? But I am going to make sure. That's the only definition of justice that I know."

"I," Spock said, "would have called it logic."

Karidian and his daughter were not only awake when they answered Kirk's knock, but already half in costume for the next night's command performance which was part of the official excuse for their being on board the *Enterprise* at all. Karidian was wearing a dressing-gown which might have been the robe of Hamlet, the ghost, or the murderer king; whichever it was, he looked kingly, an impression which he promptly reinforced by crossing to a tall-backed chair and sitting down in it as if it were a throne. In his lap he held a much-worn prompter's copy of the play, with his name scrawled across it by a felt pen.

Lenore was easier to tape: she was the mad Ophelia; or else, simply a nineteen-year-old girl in a nightgown. Karidian waved her into the background. She withdrew, her expression guarded, but remained standing by the cabin door.

Karidian turned steady, luminous eyes on Kirk. He said, "What is it you want, Captain?"

"I want a straight answer to a straight question," Kirk said. "And I promise you this: You won't be harmed aboard this ship, and

you'll be dealt with fairly when you leave it."

Karidian only nodded, as if he had expected nothing else. He was certainly intimidating. Finally Kirk said: "I suspect you, Mr Karidian. You know that. I believe the greatest performance of your life is the part you're acting out offstage."

Karidian smiled, a little sourly. "Each man in his time plays many parts."

"I'm concerned with only one. Tell me this: Are you Kodos the Executioner?"

Karidian looked toward his daughter, but he did not really seem to see her; his eyes were open, but shuttered, like a cat's.

"That was a long time ago," he said. "Back then I was a young character actor, touring the Earth colonies. As you see, I'm still doing it."

"That's not an answer," Kirk said.

"What did you expect? Were I Kodos, I would have the blood of thousands on my hands. Should I confess to a stranger, after twenty years of fleeing much more organized justice? Whatever Kodos was in those days, I have never heard it said that he was a fool."

"I have done you a favor," Kirk said. "And I have promised to treat you fairly. That's not an ordinary promise. I am the captain of this ship, and whatever justice there is aboard it is in my hands."

"I see you differently. You stand before me as the perfect symbol of our technological society: mechanized, electronicized, uniformed… and not precisely human. I hate machinery, Captain. It has done away with humanity, the striving of men to achieve greatness through their own resources. That's why I am a live actor, still, instead of a shadow on a three-V film."

"The lever is a tool," Kirk said. "We have new tools, but great men still strive, and don't feel outclassed. Wicked men use the tools to murder, like Kodos; but that doesn't make the tools wicked. Guns don't shoot people. Only men do."

"Kodos," Karidian said, "whoever he was, made decisions of life and death. Some had to die that others could live. That is the lot of kings, and the cross of kings. And probably of commanders, too, otherwise why should you be here now?"

"I don't remember ever having killed four thousand innocent people."

"I don't remember it either. But I do remember that another four thousand were saved because of it. Were I to direct a play about Kodos, that is the first thing I would bear in mind."

"It wasn't a play," Kirk said. "I was there. I saw it happen. And since then, all the surviving witnesses have been systematically murdered, except two, or possibly three. One of my officers has been poisoned. I may be next. And here you are, a man of whom we have no record until some nine years ago—and positively identified, positively, no matter how mistakenly, by the late Dr Leighton. Do you think I can ignore all that?"

"No, certainly not," Karidian said. "But that is your role. I have mine. I have played many." He looked down at his worn hands. "Sooner or later, the blood thins, the body ages, and finally one is grateful for a failing memory. I no longer treasure life, not even my own. Death for me will be a release from ritual. I am old and tired, and the past is blank."

"And that's your only answer?"

"I'm afraid so, Captain. Did you ever get everything you wanted? No, nobody does. And if you did, you might be sorry."

Kirk shrugged and turned away. He found Lenore staring at him, but there was nothing he could do for her, either. He went out.

She followed him. In the corridor on the other side of the door, she said in a cold whisper: "You are a machine. And with a big bloody stain of cruelty on your metal hide. You could have spared him."

"If he's Kodos," Kirk said, equally quietly, "then I've already shown him more mercy than he deserves. If he isn't, then we'll put you ashore at Eta Benecia, with no harm done."

"Who are you," Lenore said in a dangerous voice, "to say what harm is done?"

"Who do I have to be?"

She seemed to be about to answer; cold fire raged in her eyes. But at the. same moment, the door slid open behind her and Karidian stood there, no longer so tall or so impressive as he had been before. Tears began to run down over her cheeks; she reached for his shoulders, her head drooping.

"Father… father…"

"Never mind," Karidian said gently, regaining a little of his stature. "It's already all over. I am thy father's spirit, doomed for a certain time to walk the night."

"Hush!"

Feeling like six different varieties of monster, Kirk left them alone together.

For the performance, the briefing room had been redressed into a small theater, and cameras were spotted here and there so that the play could be seen on intercom screens elsewhere in the ship for the part of the crew that had to remain on duty. The lights were already down. Kirk was late, as usual; he was just settling into his seat—as captain he was entitled to a front row chair and had had no hesitation about claiming it—when the curtains parted and Lenore came through them, in the flowing costume of Ophelia, white with make-up.

She said in a clear, almost gay voice: "Tonight the Karidian Players present *Hamlet*—another in a series of living plays in space—dedicated to the tradition of the classic theater, which we believe will never die. *Hamlet* is a violent play about a violent time, when life was cheap and ambition was God. It is also a timeless play, about personal guilt, doubt, indecision, and the thin line between Justice and Vengeance."

She vanished, leaving Kirk brooding. Nobody needed to be introduced to *Hamlet;* that speech had been aimed directly at him. He did not need the reminder, either, but he had got it nonetheless.

The curtains parted and the great, chilling opening began. Kirk lost most of it, since McCoy chose that moment to arrive and seat himself next to Kirk with a great bustle.

"Here we are, here we are," McCoy muttered. "In the long history of medicine no doctor has ever caught the curtain of a play."

"Shut up," Kirk said, *sotto voce.* "You had plenty of notice."

"Yes, but nobody told me I'd lose a patient at the last minute."

"Somebody dead?"

"No, no. Lieutenant Daiken absconded out of sick bay, that's all. I suppose he wanted to see the play too."

"It's being piped into sick bay!"

"I know that. Pipe down, will you? How can I hear if you keep mumbling?"

Swearing silently, Kirk got up and went out. Once he was in the corridor, he went to the nearest open line and ordered a search; but it turned out that McCoy already had one going.

Routine, Kirk decided, was not enough. Daiken's entire family had been destroyed on Tarsus, and somebody had tried to kill him. This was no time to take even the slightest chance; with the play going on, not only Karidian, but the whole ship, was vulnerable to any access of passion or vengeance.

"Red security alert," Kirk said. "Search every inch, including cargo."

Getting confirmation, he went back into the converted briefing room. He was still not satisfied, but there was nothing more he could do now.

His ears were struck by a drum beat. The stage was dim, lit only by a wash of red, and the characters playing Marcellus and Horatio were just going off. Evidently the play had already reached Act One, Scene 5. The figure of the ghost materialized in the red beam and raised its arm, beckoning to Hamlet, but Hamlet refused to follow. The ghost—Karidian—beckoned again, and the drum beat heightened in intensity.

Kirk could think of nothing but that Karidian was now an open target. He circled the rapt audience quickly and silently, making for the rear of the stage.

"Speak," Hamlet said. "I'll go no further."

"Mark me," said Karidian hollowly.

"I will."

"My hour is almost come, when I to sulphurous and tormenting flames must render up myself…"

There was Daiken, crouching in the wings. He was already leveling a phaser at Karidian.

"…and you must seek revenge…"

"Daiken!" Kirk said. There was no help for it; he had to call across the stage. The dialogues intercut.

"I am thy father's spirit, doomed for a certain term to walk the night…"

"He murdered my father," Daiken said. "And my mother."

"…And for the day confined to fast in fires, Till the foul crimes done in my days…"

"Get back to sick bay!"

"I know. I saw. He murdered them."

"…are burnt and purged away."

The audience had begun to murmur; they could hear every word. So could Karidian. He looked off toward Daiken, but the light was too bad for him to see anything. In a shaken voice, he tried to go on.

"I… I could a tale unfold whose lightest word…"

"You could be wrong. Don't throw your life away on a mistake."

"…would t-tear up thy soul, freeze thy young blood…"

"Daiken, give me that weapon."

"No."

Several people in the audience were standing now, and Kirk could see a few security guards moving cautiously down the sidelines. They would be too late; Daiken had a dead bead on Karidian.

Then the scenery at the back tore, and Lenore came out. Her eyes were bright and feverish, and in her hand she carried an absurdly long dagger.

"It's over!" she said in a great, theatrical voice. "Never mind, father, I'm strong! Come, ye spirits of the air, unsex me now! Hie thee hither, that in the porches of thine ear…"

"Child, child!"

She could not hear him. She was the mad Ophelia; but the lines were Lady Macbeth's.

"All the ghosts are dead. Who would have thought they had so much blood in 'em? I've freed you, father. I've taken the blood away from you. Had he not so much resembled my father as he slept, I'd have done it."

"No!" Karidian said, his voice choked with horror. "You've left me nothing! You were untouched by what I did, you weren't even born! I wanted to leave you something clean."

"Balsam! I've given you everything! You're safe, no one can touch you! See Banquo there, the Caesar, even he can't touch you! This castle hath a pleasant seat."

Kirk went out onto the stage, watching the security guards out of the corner of his eyes. Daiken seemed to be frozen by the action under the lights, but his gun still had not wavered.

"That's enough," Kirk said. "Come with me, both of you."

Karidian turned to him, spreading his hands wide. "Captain," he said. "Try to understand. I was a soldier in a great cause. There were things that had to be done—hard things, terrible things. You know the price of that; you too are a captain."

"Stop it, father," Lenore said, in a spuriously rational voice. "There is nothing to explain."

"There is. Murder. Flight. Suicide. Madness. And still the price is not enough; my daughter has killed too."

"For you! For you! I saved you!"

"For the price of seven innocent men," Kirk said.

"Innocent?" Lenore gave a great theatrical laugh, like a coloratura playing Medea. "Innocent! They saw! They were guilty!"

“That’s enough, Lenore,” Kirk said. “The play is over. It was over twenty years ago. Are you coming with me, or do I have to drag you?”

“Better go,” Daiken’s voice said from the wings. He stood up and came forward into the light, the gun still leveled. “I wasn’t going to be so merciful, but we’ve had enough madness. Thanks, Captain.”

Lenore spun on him. With a movement like a flash of lightning, she snatched the gun away from him.

“Stand back!” she screamed. “Stand back, everyone! The play goes on!”

“No!” Karidian cried out hoarsely. “In the name of God, child…”

“Captain Caesar! You could have had Egypt! Beware the Ides of March!”

She pointed the gun at Kirk and pulled the trigger. But fast as she was in her madness, Karidian was even quicker. The beam struck him squarely on the chest. He fell silently.

Lenore wailed like a lost kitten and dropped to her knees beside him. The security guards stampeded onto the stage, but Kirk waved them back.

“Father!” Lenore crooned. “Father! Oh proud death, what feast is toward in thine eternal cell, that thou such a prince at a shot so bloodily has struck!” She began to laugh again. “The cue, father, the cue! No time to sleep! The play! The play’s the thing, wherein we’ll catch the conscience of the king.”

Gentle hands drew her away. In Kirk’s ear, McCoy’s voice said: “And in the long run, she didn’t even get the lines right.”

“Take care of her,” Kirk said tonelessly. “Kodos is dead, but I think she may walk in her sleep.”

THE GALILEO SEVEN

(Simon Wincelberg and Oliver Crawford)

The USS *Enterprise* operated under a standing order to investigate all quasar and quasar-like phenomena wherever and whenever it encountered them. To Kirk, it seemed to have met up with one. A sinister formation had appeared on the bridge's main viewing screen—a bluish mass, threaded, with red streaks of radiant energy. It dominated the sky ahead.

Kirk, eyeing the screen, pushed a button, only too conscious of the critical presence of his passenger, High Commissioner Ferris. "Captain to shuttlecraft *Galileo*," he said. "Stand by, Mr Spock."

Ferris voiced his disapproval. "I remind you, Captain, that I am entirely opposed to this delay. Your mission is to get those medical supplies to Makus III in time for their transfer to the New Paris colonies."

"And I must remind you of our standing order, sir. There will be no problem. It's only three days to Makus III. And the transfer doesn't take place for five."

Ferris was fretful. "I don't like to take chances. With the plague out of control on New Paris, we must get those drugs there in time."

"We will." Kirk turned back to his console. "Captain to *Galileo*. All systems clear for your take-off."

"Power up, Captain. All instruments activated. All readings normal. All go."

Spock's voice… reassuring. As Science Officer, he was commanding the investigating team selected from the *Enterprise* crew for research into the space curiosity charted under the name of Murasaki 312. Now he sat, strapped, in the shuttlecraft's pilot seat, the others behind him—McCoy, Scott, Yeoman Mears, a fresh-faced girl, Boma, the Negro astrophysicist, radiation specialist Gaetano, navigator Latimer. All together, seven: the *Galileo's* seven.

"Launch shuttlecraft," Kirk said.

On the huge flight deck the heavy hangar doors swung open. The shuttlecraft taxied toward them and moved out into the emptiness of space.

Spock spoke over his shoulder. "Position."

"Three point seven… no, no, sir," Latimer said. "Four point—"

"Make up your mind," Spock said.

"My indicator's gone crazy," Latimer said.

Boma spoke quickly. "To be expected, Mr Spock. Quasars are extremely disruptive. Just how much, we don't know…"

Spock, eyes on his panel, said dryly, "Considerably, Mr Boma."

Gaetano made his discouraging contribution. "My radiation reading is increasing rapidly, Mr Spock!"

"Stop forward momentum!"

Latimer pushed switches. "I can't stop it, sir! Nothing happens!" McCoy leaned over to glance at his instruments. "Spock, we're being drawn right into the thing!"

Struggling with his own controls, Spock said, "Full power astern!"

But there was no power to reverse the onward plunge of the *Galileo*. "What's happening?" McCoy cried.

Boma said, "We underestimated the strength of the nucleonic attraction."

Spock reached for his speaker. "*Galileo* to *Enterprise*. "We're out of control, Captain! Being pulled directly into the heart of Murasaki 312. Receiving violent radiation on outer…"

A blast of static drowned Spock's voice. Kirk rushed over to Uhura's station. "Can't you get anything at all, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing clear, sir. Not on any frequency. Just those couple of words about being pulled off course."

Kirk wheeled. "Mr Sulu, get me a fix on the *Galileo!*"

Sulu turned a bewildered face. "Our scanners are blocked, Captain. We're getting a mess of readings I've never seen before. Nothing makes sense!"

Kirk strode to the library computer. He got a hum, a click—and the flat, metallic computer voice. "Negative ionic concentration 1.64 by 102 meter. Radiation wavelength 370 angstroms, harmonics upwards along entire spectrum."

Kirk turned, appalled. Staring at him, Ferris said, "What is it, Captain?"

"That thing out there has completely ionized this entire sector!"

He glared at the screen. "At least four complete solar systems in this vicinity—and somewhere out there is a twenty-four-foot shuttlecraft out of control, off its course. Finding a needle in a haystack would be child's play compared to finding…"

Coiling, hungry, the bluish mass on the screen glared back at him, a blight on the face of space.

But the controls of the shuttlecraft weren't the only victims of Murasaki 312. It had rendered useless the normal searching systems of the *Enterprise*. Without them, the Starship was drifting, blind, almost as helpless as the *Galileo*,

Ferris could not resist his I-told-you-so compulsion. "I was opposed to this from the beginning," he said to Kirk. "Our flight to Makus III had the very highest priority."

Kirk, his mind straining to contingencies that confronted the *Galileo's* crew of seven, said, "I am aware of that, Commissioner. At the same time I have certain scientific duties—and exploring the Murasaki Effect is one of them."

"But you have lost your crew," Ferris said.

If there were people who couldn't resist an "I told you so," there were just as many who enjoyed making the painfully obvious more painful. Kirk held on to his temper. "We have two days to find them," he said.

Ferris pointed to the screen. "In all that? Two days?"

Kirk lost his temper. "Are you suggesting that I just turn around and leave them in it?"

"You shouldn't have sent them out in the first place!" Ferris paused. "You are concerned with only seven people. I am thinking of the millions in the New Paris colonies who will die if we don't get these medicines to them. It's your obstinate insistence on carrying out these inconsequential investigations that…"

A bureaucrat is a bureaucrat is a bureaucrat, Kirk thought. They could function with paper. But remove them from paper into the sphere of decisive action and they turned into moralizing futilities. Scorn restored his composure. "We will make our scheduled rendezvous, Commissioner," he said evenly. "You have my word."

Uhura spoke. "Captain, there is one planet in this vicinity capable of sustaining human life. Type M, oxygen-nitrogen. Listed as Taurus II." The sympathy in her voice was cool water to a thirsty man. Kirk went to her. She looked up at him. "It is very nearly dead center of the Murasaki Effect, as closely as we can make out with our equipment malfunctions."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Kirk said. "Mr Sulu?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Set course for Taurus II."

"Course laid in, sir."

"Aren't you shooting in the dark?" Ferris said. "Assuming that they are there?"

"If they aren't there, Commissioner, they are all dead by now. We will search Taurus II because there is no sense in searching any place else."

"You said something about a needle in a haystack. Useless."

"Not if you want your needle back."

Strangely enough, the needle had fallen upon soft hay. However, soft was the best you could say about the spongily ugly surface of Taurus II. It had cushioned the impact of the *Galileo's* crash landing in a roughly circular crater. Rock walls reared up toward a sky of a repellently bilious shade of green. It was not a prepossessing planet. The craft, canted over, had banged people and things around inside. Spock was bleeding green from a cut on his head. McCoy attended to it and then made his way to Yeoman Mears.

"Are you all right?"

"I… think so, Doctor."

Boma said, "That is what I call a ride."

"What happened?" Latimer asked him.

"I can't be sure… but I'd say that the magnetic potential of the Murasaki Effect was such that it was multiplied geometrically as we gathered speed. We were simply shot into the center of the Effect like a projectile. What do you think, Mr Spock?"

"Your evaluation seems reasonable."

Scott, holding an aching head, joined Spock in checking the instruments and control panel. "What a mess!" he said.

Spock stood up. "Picturesque descriptions won't mend broken circuits, Mr Scott. I think you'll find your work cut out for you." He threw a switch on the communicator.

"*Galileo* to *Enterprise*. Do you read me?"

"You don't really expect an answer, do you?" Scott said.

"I expect nothing. It is simply logical to try every alternative. A reading on the atmosphere, please, Doctor McCoy."

"As soon as I finish checking the crew…"

"If anyone had been injured, I assume you would have been so informed by now. The reading, Doctor."

There was irritation in the glance Spock received from McCoy. After a moment the Medical Officer picked up his kit and moved to an instrument panel. "Partial pressure of oxygen is 70 millimeters of mercury. Nitrogen, 140. Breathable, if you're not running in competition."

"The facts, please," Spock said.

"Traces of argon, neon, krypton, all in acceptable quantities. But I wouldn't recommend this place for a summer resort."

"Your opinion will be noted. You are recording this, Yeoman?"

"Of course, Mr Spock."

"Very good. Mr Scott, if you will immediately conduct a damage survey."

Scott said, "Naturally."

Spock ignored the tone of the comment. He said, "I suggest we move outside to give Mr Scott room to work. Mr Latimer, Mr Gaetano, please arm yourselves and scout out the immediate area. Stay in visual contact with the ship."

"Aye, aye, sir," Gaetano said.

The two were removing phaser pistols from a locker as McCoy turned to Spock. "What do you think our chances are of communicating with the *Enterprise?*"

"Under current conditions, extremely poor."

"But they'll be looking for us!"

"If the ionization effect is as widespread as I believe it is, they'll be looking for us without instruments. By visual contact only. On those terms, it is a very large solar system."

"Then you don't think they'll find us."

"Not so long as we are grounded."

McCoy exploded. "I've never been able to stand your confoundedly eternal cheerfulness, Spock!"

"Better make an effort to, Doctor." The suggestion was mildly made. "We may be here for a long time."

Kirk himself had small cause for cheer. The *Enterprise* scanners had gone completely on strike. "Mr Sulu, have you tried tying in with the auxiliary power units?"

"Yes, sir. No change."

Scowling, Kirk hit a button. "Transporter Room. This is the Captain. Are the Transporters beaming yet?"

The technician sounded apologetic. "Not one hundred percent, sir. We beamed down some inert material but it came back in a dissociated condition. We wouldn't dare try it with people."

"Thank you." He pushed another button. "Captain to Flight Deck. Prepare shuttlecraft *Columbus* for immediate search of planet surface. Correlate coordinates with Mr Sulu. Lieutenant Uhura?"

"Yes, sir?

"Anything at all?"

"All wavelengths dominated by ionization effect, Captain. Transmissions blocked, reception impossible."

To add to his joy in life, Ferris appeared beside Kirk's command chair. "Well, Captain?"

Kirk said, "We have until 2823.8 to continue our search, Commissioner."

"You don't really think you'll have any luck, do you?"

Kirk drew a hand down his cheek. "Those people out there happen to be friends and shipmates of mine. I intend to continue this ship's search for them until the last possible moment."

"Very well, Captain. But not a second beyond that limit. Is that clear? If it is not, I refer you to Book 19, Section 433, Paragraph 12."

"I am familiar with the regulations, Commissioner. And I know all about your authority."

Tight-faced, he struck a button on his console.

"Launch shuttlecraft *Columbus!*"

Outside the *Galileo*, Spock was examining the nearest section of the wall encircling the crater. Rescue was indeed a remote possibility. Even if the *Enterprise's* searching equipment had remained unaffected by Murasaki 312, Taurus II was just one planet among many in the quadrant's solar systems. Hidden like this in the hollow made by the crater's rocky wall, the *Galileo* would be virtually invisible,

McCoy, joining him, looked up at the wall. "I can't say much for our circumstances," he said, "but at least it's your big chance."

"My big chance for what, Doctor?"

"Command," McCoy said. "I know you, Spock. You've never voiced it, but you've always thought logic was the best basis on which to build command. Am I right?"

"I am a logical man," Spock said.

"It'll take more than logic to get us out of this."

"Perhaps, Doctor… but I can't think of a better place to start trying. I recognize that command has fascinations, even under such circumstances as these. But I neither enjoy the idea of command nor am I frightened by it. It simply exists. And I shall do what logically needs to be done."

They clambered back into the craft, and Scott lifted a grim face from the control panel. "We've lost a great deal of fuel, Mr Spock. We have no chance at all to reach escape velocity. And even if we hope to make orbit, we'll have to lighten our load by at least five hundred pounds."

"The weight of three grown men," Spock said.

Scott glanced at him, startled. "Why, yes… I guess you could put it that way."

McCoy was openly outraged. "Or the equivalent weight in *equipment*," he said.

Spock faced him. "Doctor McCoy, with few exceptions we will use virtually every piece of equipment in attaining orbit. There is very little surplus weight except among our passengers."

Boma, with Yeoman Mears, had been taking tricorder readings near the hatch. Now he stopped. "You mean three of us will have to stay behind?"

"Unless the situation changes radically," Spock said.

"And who is to choose those who remain behind?"

"As commanding officer the choice is mine."

Boma's face hardened. "You wouldn't be interested in. drawing lots?"

Spock said "I believe I am better qualified to select those who will stay behind than any random drawing of lots." He spoke without a trace of egotism in voice or manner. "My decision will be a logical one, Mr Boma, arrived at through logical, processes."

"Life and death are not logical, Spock!" McCoy cried.

"But attaining a desired goal is."

Spock ignored the tension in the atmosphere. "I would suggest we proceed to a more careful examination of the… hull: We may have overlooked some minor damage."

Boma glared after him as he left. "Some minor damage was overlooked," he said, "when they put his head together!"

"Not his head," McCoy said. "His heart."

Tension was rising in everybody. Over at the farther crater wall Latimer and Gaetano were making a nervous survey of the area. Suddenly Gaetano stopped, listening. Latimer, too, halted. They listened to the sound—a rhythmic scraping noise such as might be made by rubbing wood against some corrugated surface. Latimer became conscious of an uneasy impression that the crater wall was breathing, the mist of its breath the fog that drifted over it, reducing visibility. The mist had come suddenly, like the sound. The scraping noise was repeated.

"What is it?" Latimer whispered.

"I don't know," Gaetano said. "It came from up there."

"No… back there…"

They stared at each other. The sound surrounded them.

"Everywhere… it's all around us."

"Let's get out of here!" Latimer cried.

Then he yelled, breaking into a run. From the shadow made by a cleft in the wall above them a gigantic shape had emerged. Latimer screamed—and fell. Gaetano jerked out his phaser. He fired it at the fog-filled cleft.

He turned. The shaft of a spear was protruding from Latimer's back. It was as thick as a slim telephone pole.

The scream, reverberating against the crater's walls, had been heard by Spock and Boma. The Vulcan strode to Gaetano, where he stood over Latimer's body, still in shock, still staring up at the foggy cleft.

"How?" Spock said.

The dazed Gaetano lowered his phaser. "Something… huge… terrible. Up there!" He pointed to the cleft.

Spock walked over to the wall. Seizing an outcropping of rock, he began to climb up to the crevice. Boma spoke to Gaetano. "What was it? Did you see what it was?"

"Like a… a giant ape." He started to tremble. "It was all… so quick. There was a… a sound first."

Spock was back. "There's nothing up there," he said.

"I tell you there was!" Gaetano shouted.

Spock's voice was quiet. "I do not doubt your word."

"I hit it. I swear my phaser hit it," Gaetano said.

Spock didn't answer. Looking down at Latimer's body, he tugged at the spear shaft. It came loose in his hand, exposing its point—a large triangular stone, honed into shape and sharpness.

"The Folsom Point," Spock said.

"Sir?"

"Mr Boma, this spearhead bears a remarkable resemblance to the Folsom Point, discovered in 1926 old Earth calendar, in New Mexico, North America. Quite similar… more crudely shaped about the haft, however. Not very efficient."

"Not very efficient?" Boma was furious. "Is that all you have to say?"

Surprised, Spock looked at him. "Am I in error, Mr Boma?"

"Error? You? Impossible!"

"Then, what—" Spock began.

"A man lies there dead! And you talk about stone spears! What about Latimer? What about the dead man?"

"A few words on behalf of the dead will not bring them back to life, Mr Boma."

Gaetano was glaring at him, too. He spoke to Boma. "Give me a hand with Latimer, will you?" He turned to Spock. "Unless you think we should leave his body here in the interest of efficiency."

"Bringing him back to the ship should not interfere with our repair efforts. If you'd like some assistance…"

"We'll do it!" Gaetano said sharply. Nodding to Boma, they reached down to the body. As they lifted it, Spock's keen eyes were studying the spearhead's construction.

Kirk was trying to fight off a sense of complete futility.

"? and great loss." His voice was so broken as he dictated the last three words into his Captain's Log that he wondered if he should delete them. Spock… McCoy… Scott… all three of them gone, lost to the hideous blueness of what still showed on the screen.

Uhura spoke. "Captain, the *Columbus* has returned from searching quadrants 779X by 534M. Negative results."

"Have them proceed to the next quadrants. Any word from Engineering on the sensors?"

"They're working on them, sir. Still inoperable."

"The Transporters?"

"Still reported unsafe, sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Captain Kirk…"

It was Ferris. "Captain, I do not relish the thought of abandoning your crewmen out there. However, I must remind you that—"

"I haven't forgotten," Kirk said wearily.

"You're running out of time," Ferris said.

A man of paper. "I haven't forgotten that, either," Kirk said. He rammed a button on his console. "This is the Captain. Try using overload power on the Transporters. We have to get it working." He got up to go to Uhura. "Lieutenant, order the *Columbus* to open its course two degrees on each lap from now on."

Sulu, surprised into protest, spoke. "But Captain, two degrees means they'll overlook more than a dozen terrestrial miles on each search loop."

Kirk turned. "It also means we'll at least have a fighting chance of checking most of the planet's surface. Mind your helm, Mr Sulu."

Sulu flushed. "Yes, sir."

Ferris was still standing beside his command chair. He said coldly, "Twenty-four more hours, Captain." Kirk didn't answer. He stared ahead at the viewing screen. Somewhere in the midst of that mysterious blueness, Taurus II existed, its substance solid, its air breathable—an oasis in the center of hell. Had Spock found it?

In the marooned *Galileo*, McCoy and Yeoman Mears had collected equipment to jettison. Arms laden, McCoy said, "This stuff ought to save us at least fifty pounds of weight, Spock."

"If we could scrape up another hundred pounds, what with Mr Latimer gone…" Yeoman Mears didn't finish her sentence.

"We would still be at least one hundred and fifty pounds overweight," Spock said.

"I can't believe you're serious about leaving someone behind," McCoy said. "Whatever those creatures are out there…"

"It is more rational to sacrifice one man than six," Spock said.

"I'm not talking about rationality/"

"You might be wise to start."

Boma stuck his head through the open hatch. "We're ready, Mr Spock."

"For what, Mr Boma?"

"The services… for Latimer."

Spock straightened. "Mr Boma. We are working against time."

"The man is dead. He deserves a decent burial. You're the Captain. A few words from you…"

If Spock's facial muscles had been capable of expressing annoyance, they would have twisted with it. As they were not, he looked at McCoy. "Doctor, perhaps you know the correct words for such an occasion."

"It's your place," McCoy said.

"My place is here. If you please, Doctor."

The facial muscles of the non-Vulcans had no trouble in showing annoyance. Spock's cool detachment exceedingly irritated them. "Spock, we may all die here!" McCoy shouted. "At least let us die like men, not machines!"

"By taking care of first things first, I hope to increase our chances of not dying here." Spock moved to where Scott was still at work on the console. "Perhaps if you were to channel the second auxiliary tank through the primary intake valve, Mr Scott."

"Too delicate, sir. It may not take the pressure as it is."

McCoy glared at Spock's stooped back. Then he followed the others out of the hatch and over to the mound of earth a few feet away from the *Galileo*. He bent for a handful of dirt and dropped it on the mound. "Dust thou art and to dust shalt thou return. Amen."

People's heads bowed. "Amen," they echoed. They all stood still for a minute, each with his private thoughts—and the rhythmic grating sound came from what seemed to be distance.

"What is it?" said Yeoman Mears.

McCoy had looked up. "I don't know. But it sounds manmade."

"Manmade! You wouldn't say that if you saw what I saw!" cried Gaetano. "It's them, those things out there somewhere!"

McCoy spoke to him and Boma. "You'd better stay on watch. I'll check with Mr Spock."

He and Yeoman Mears reentered the craft to hear a dismayed Scott cry, "The pressure's dropping, sir. We're losing everything!"

"What happened?" Spock asked.

"One of the lines gave. The strain of coming through the atmosphere… the added load when we tried to bypass—"

McCoy interrupted. "Spock!"

The Vulcan made a gesture for silence, concentrating on Scott. Staring at a gauge, the engineer said slowly, "Well, that does it. We have no fuel at all!"

"Then that solves the problem of who to leave behind."

"Spock!" McCoy yelled.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Come outside. Something's happening."

Straightening, Spock said, "You will consider the alternatives, Mr Scott."

Scott rose impatiently. "What alternatives? We have no fuel!"

"Mr Scott, there are always alternatives."

He took his Vulcan calm with him as he followed McCoy out of the ship. The grating noise was louder. Spock listened, as concentrated on it as he'd been on Scott. McCoy glanced at his composed face. "And what do those super-sensitive ears of yours make of that?"

"Wood," Spock said. "Rubbing, on some kind of leather."

"They're getting ready," Gaetano muttered. "They'll attack."

"Not necessarily," Boma said. "It could be a simple tribal rite… assuming it's a tribal culture."

"Not a tribal culture," Spock said gently. "Their artifacts are too primitive. Merely a loose association of some sort."

"We do not know that they are mere animals. They may well be capable of reason."

"We know they're capable of killing," Boma reminded him.

Spock looked at him. "If they are protecting themselves by their own lights…"

"That is exactly what we would be doing!" Boma argued.

Gaetano said, "The majority of us—"

"I am not interested in the opinion of the majority, Mr Gaetano!" It was the first time Spock had raised his voice. Now its unexpected sharpness came as a shock to all of them.

"The components must be weighed—our dangers balanced against our duty to other life forms, friendly or not." Spock paused. "There is a third course."

"It could get us all killed." But the insolence had left Gaetano.

"I think not," Spock said. "Doctor McCoy, you and Yeoman Mears will remain in the ship. Assist Mr Scott in any way possible. We shall return shortly."

He turned to Gaetano and Boma. "You will follow my orders to the letter. You will fire only when so ordered—and at my designated targets."

"Now you're talking," said Gaetano.

"Yes, I am talking, Mr Gaetano. And you will hear. We shall fire to frighten. Not to kill."

"If we only knew more about them," Yeoman Mears said fearfully.

"We know enough," Boma said. "If they're tribal, they'll have a sense of unity. We can use that."

"How, Mr Boma?"

"By hitting them hard, sir. Give them a bloody nose! Make them think twice about attacking us! A good offense is the best defense!"

"I agree!" cried Gaetano. "If we just stand by and do nothing, we're just giving them an invitation to come down and slaughter us!"

Spock's face had taken on a look of grave reflection. "I am frequently appalled," he said, "by the low regard for life you Earth people have."

"We are practical about it!" Gaetano's voice shook. "I say we hit them before they hit us!"

"Mr Boma?" Spock said.

"Absolutely."

"Doctor McCoy?"

"It seems logical to me."

"It also seems logical to me," Spock said. "But taking life indiscriminately…"

"You were quick enough to talk about leaving three of us behind," Gaetano said. "Why all the sudden solicitude about some kind of animal?"

"You saw what they did to Latimer," Boma said.

So it had to be put into words of one syllable. But Spock was a master of primitives' languages. "I am in command here, Mr Gaetano. The orders are mine to give, as the responsibility is mine to take. Follow me."

He led the way to the crater wall. The grating sound grew still louder as the trip began the climb up the rocky escarpment. Gaetano, apprehensive, arranged himself third in position. Spock signaled a halt. The slope ahead of them loomed vague and

indistinct through mist swirls. Suddenly, among the rocks immediately above them, there was movement. Spock heard it first. He tensed with alertness, readying his phaser. Something rose from behind the rocks, something impossibly huge. It might have been man-shaped—but he couldn't tell, for the creature held an enormous leather shield before its body. Then a great spear whistled past his head. Spock, aiming his phaser, fired it.

There was a roar, half-human—a scream of pain and fear. The thing ducked behind a rock, hurling its shield downward.

Spock sidestepped to avoid its strike. He was hoisting it up as Boma and Gaetano joined him.

Awed, Gaetano whispered, "It must be twelve feet high."

Spock dropped the shield. Still leading the way, he motioned the others forward. They made the crest of the crater. Now the scraping noise was louder still, harsh, rasping, broken by grunting sounds.

"The mists…" Gaetano complained. "I can't see."

"They are directly ahead of us," Spock said. "Several, I believe. You will direct your phasers to two o'clock and to ten o'clock."

"I say we hit them dead on!" Gaetano said.

Spock turned his head. "Fortunately, I am giving the orders, Mr Gaetano. Take aim, please."

He waited. "Fire!" he said.

Whatever their targets were, they could certainly howl. Spock listened to the roaring. "Cease fire!" he said. The roaring stilled. Spock nodded, satisfied. "They should think twice before bothering us again."

"I still say we should have killed them."

"It was not necessary, Mr Gaetano. Fear will do for us what needs to be done. Mr Boma, return to the ship. Mr Gaetano, you will remain here on guard, keeping visual contact with the ship."

"Out here? Alone?"

"Security must be maintained, Mr Gaetano."

Boma said, "At least let me stay with him."

"My intention is to post you in another position, Mr Boma."

The two exchanged terrified looks. Spock regarded them with a mild curiosity. "Gentlemen," he said, "I regret having to post you in hazardous positions. Unfortunately, I have no choice. In the event of danger, the ship must have warning."

"Even if some of us must die for it?"

“There is the possibility of danger, Mr Boma. But it cannot be helped.”

He began the climb back down to the ship. After a long moment, Boma turned to follow him. “Good luck, Gaetano,” he said. .

“Yeah, sure,” Gaetano said.

As they approached the *Galileo*, Spock said, “Mr Boma, your post is here, near the ship.” He hoisted himself through the hatch and Yeoman Mears said, “Did you find them, Mr Spock?”

“We found them. I don’t think they’ll trouble us again.": “I hope not,” McCoy said. “Spock, Scott has some idea.”

He clearly did. Scott’s face was alight with idea. “It’s dangerous, Mr Spock—but it just may work.”

“Go ahead, Mr Scott.".

“I can adjust the main reactor to function on a substitute fuel supply.” He paused, unable to resist the temptation to give full dramatic value to his idea. “Our phasers, sir. I could adapt them and use their energy. It will take time, but it’s possible.”

“The objection is they’re our only defense,” McCoy said.

“They would also seem to be our only hope.” Spock made his decision fast. “Doctor… Yeoman,… your phasers, please.”

“But what if those creatures attack again?" the girl asked.

“They will not attack, not for many hours at any rate,” Spock told her. “By then, with luck, we should be gone.”

Scott nodded. “If I can get a full load, we’ll be able to achieve orbit with all hands. Not that we can maintain it long.”

“It will not be necessary to maintain it long. In less than twenty-four hours the *Enterprise* will be forced to abandon its search in order to make its rendezvous. If our orbit decays after that time, it will make no difference.” Spock shrugged. “Whether we die coming out of orbit or here on the surface, we shall surely die. Your phaser, Doctor.”

Reluctantly McCoy and the girl surrendered their phasers. Spock passed them over to Scott.

At the same moment on the *Enterprise*, the Transporter officer was reporting a successful materialization to Kirk. “The crates I beamed down to Taurus II came back all right, sir. In my opinion the Transporters are now safe for human transport.”

It was the first good news since they had contacted Murasaki 312. Kirk pushed his intercom button. "This is the Captain. Landing parties 1, 2, and 3. Report to Transporter Room for immediate beam-down to the planet's surface. Ordinance condition 1-A."

"Captain… it's a big planet," the Transporter officer said. "It'll be sheer good luck if our landing parties find anything."

"I'm counting on luck, Lieutenant. It's almost the only tool we've got that might work."

But Spock, despite his hope that fear would restrain the hostility of the gorilla-like creatures, wasn't trusting to luck. For the third time he left the *Galileo* to check with Boma. "Have you seen or heard anything unusual, Mr Boma?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Is Mr Gaetano keeping in contact with you?"

"I saw him up in those rocks just a few minutes ago."

Something else had seen Gaetano among the rocks. It aimed a large rock at his phaser, knocking it out of his hand. Terrified, he scrambled after it—and a spear hurled past him, striking the air between him and the weapon. He ran toward a rock crevice. It ended in a blank black wall. Trapped, he turned. The crevice entrance was blocked by a massive bulk, hairy, featureless. The creature moved toward him. He screamed.

It was Spock who found the dropped phaser. As he bent to retrieve it, he heard a snuffling, half-growl, half-grunt from somewhere in the rocks ahead of him. Then there was silence. McCoy and Boma climbed up to him. He extended his hand. "Mr Gaetano's phaser," he said.

"Look!" Boma cried.

The footprint in the rubble was human in form. Its enormity was its horror.

Boma and McCoy stared at it, unbelieving. Spock handed Gaetano's phaser to McCoy. "Take this back to Mr Scott for conversion, please, Doctor."

Boma flared up at him. "Is that all this means to you? Just a phaser to be recovered?"

Spock stared at him, puzzled. "Explain, Mr Boma."

The frenzied Boma broke into a shout. "Gaetano's gone! Who knows what's happened to him! And you just hand over his phaser as though nothing had happened at all!"

Spock ignored the outburst. Drawing put his own phaser, he handed it over to McCoy, saying, "And please give this to Mr Scott

in case I don't return."

"Where are you going?" McCoy demanded.

Spock said, "I have a certain… scientific curiosity about what has occurred to Mr Gaetano. You will return, to the ship, if you please."

He slipped off into the mist, leaving Boma to gape after him. McCoy, shaking his head, said, "He'll risk his neck locating Gaetano. And if he finds him alive, he's just as liable to order him to stay behind when the ship leaves. You tell me."

"Do you think the ship will ever leave?"

"It won't without these phasers," McCoy said. "Let's get back to Scott."

Sharp-eyed, agile as a cat, Spock was creeping upward over rocks. Then he saw the ledge. Gaetano lay sprawled on it; unmoving. Spock bent over the body. As he realized what had been done to it, his impassive face went stony with revulsion. After a moment, he lifted it, hoisting it up and around his shoulders. The snuffling sound came again, this time from the mist-drifted rocks behind him. He looked back. Just .the rocks, the fog coiling around them. He moved on—and suddenly the scraping noise broke out, close by all around him, moving with him as he moved. Aware of it, he didn't hurry, but maintained his pace, measured, controlled. Below him now he could see the *Galileo*, its terrified people huddled together at the hatch, watching him.

He reached them just as a spear clanged harmlessly against the ship's hull. McCoy and Boma ran to him to help him enter the hatch. Inside, McCoy reached toward the body's lolling head. "Is he…?"

"Mr Boma, secure that hatch!" Spock said. He walked swiftly toward the aft compartment. McCoy followed him and eased the body from his shoulders. Boma, up forward near the hatch window, called, "I see one out there!" Yeoman Mears, joining him, peered out the window. Shuddering, she covered her face with her hands. "Horrible… it's a monster…"

Boma, patting her shoulder, managed a wry grin. "We probably don't look so good to them, either."

Spock had gone to the forward window to look out of it. Something crashed against the hull. A great boulder tumbled past the window and rolled away to crash up against the side of the crater.

"All right, Spock," Boma said. "You have the answers. What now?"

Spock turned. "Your tone is hostile, Mr Boma."

"My tone isn't the only thing that's hostile!"

"Strange," Spock mused. "Step by step I have done the logical thing."

McCoy blew up. "A little less analysis and a little more action! That's what we need!"

"How about analyzing what's happening to the plates of this craft?"

"The plates are titanite, Mr Boma," Spock said. "They will hold. At least for a time."

"We have phasers. We could drive them off!"

"Mr Boma, every ounce of energy in the phasers is needed by Mr Scott. Were we to attack the creatures, the energy expended might well provide the very impetus required to secure our orbit."

The ship shook under another smash by a boulder—a bigger one, heavier, harder.

"How long, Mr Scott?" Spock asked.

"Another hour. Maybe two."

"Can't you hurry it up?"

Scott raised an impatient face from his labor. "Doctor, phaser will drain only so fast."

A steady, relentless hammering had begun on the hull. Boma, looking up, saw its plates vibrating. "How long can those plates hold out under *that?*" he cried. "*We've got to do something!*"

All eyes were on Spock. He met them directly, his own calm, as composed as though theirs contained no accusation.

Kirk lacked Spock's stoic capacity to tolerate helplessness. Though the ion storm was dispersing, the Starship's slow recovery of its operational power had tightened his nerves to the breaking point. He snapped at Uhura. "Lieutenant, what word from the sensor section?"

"At last report they were beginning to get readings, but they were completely scrambled."

"I'm not interested in the last report! I want the current one!"

"Yes, sir."

Kirk slammed his fist into his palm. When the elevator door opened, he didn't turn his head. He heard Ferris clear his throat.

Then he was beside him, glancing ostentatiously at his watch. "You have three hours, Captain."

"I know the number of hours I have, Commissioner."

"Delighted to hear it. However, I shall continue to remind you."

"You do that," Kirk said.

Uhura spoke. "Sir, sensor section reporting. Static interference still creating false images. Estimate 80 percent undependable."

"Radio communication?"

"Clearing slowly but still incapable of transmission and reception."

"What do you intend to do?" demanded Ferris.

Kirk's overstrained control broke. "Do? I'll keep on searching, foot by foot, inch by inch… by candlelight if I have to, so long as I have a second left! And if you'll keep your nose off my bridge, I'll be thankful!"

"I'm sure your diligence will please the authorities, Captain. I am not sure they will appreciate the way you address a High Commissioner."

"I am in command here!"

"You are, Captain. For exactly—" he consulted his watch—"two hours and forty-two minutes."

Spock slammed no fist into his palm. The hammering by great rocks continued to shake the *Galileo*—but his Vulcan heritage forbade any release of tension building up in him. Boma's panic had now taken the form of an open scorn. Nor was there the slightest sign of sympathy in the others. Never had the half-human in Spock felt so lonely. But he gave no evidence of it as he said, "Mr Scott, how much power do we have in our central batteries?"

"They're in good shape, sir. But they won't lift us off, if that's what you're getting at."

"Are they strong enough to electrify the exterior of the ship?"

A slow grin spread over Scott's face. "That they are, laddie." Reaching for some cables, he detached them.

Spock spoke to the others. "Get into the center of the ship. Don't touch the plates. Be sure you're insulated."

They obeyed, watching as Scott clamped an electrode to a metal projection on one side of the ship's interior. He was preparing the

second electrode when a ferocious smash-down resounded from over their heads. Scott nodded at Spock. "Stand by," Spock said.

The second electrode, attached, completed the circuit. Sparks flew up in a shower, followed by a wild shrieking of pain, shock and fury from outside the craft. The hammering stopped. Scott, releasing the electrodes, said, "I don't dare use any more power if we want to be sure of ignition."

Staring up at the silent hull, McCoy said, "It worked.

"For the moment," Spock said.

"For the moment?"

"Mr Boma, they will return when they discover they're not seriously hurt. In the meantime, please check the aft compartment. See if there's anything else we can unload to lighten the ship."

Boma came back, grim-faced. "Gaetano's body is there."

"It will have to be left behind," Spock said.

"Not without a burial!"

"I would not recommend one, Mr Boma. The creatures won't be far away." He paused. "A burial would expose the members of this crew to unnecessary peril."

"I'll take that chance," Boma said.

Spock looked at the alien human. "Do your vestigial ceremonies mean that much to you?"

"Spock, I would insist on a decent burial even if it were your body lying back there!"

"Mr Boma!" It was McCoy's rebuke.

Boma whirled on him. "I'm sick and tired of this Vulcan machine!"

Scott had reddened with anger. "That's enough from you! Mr Spock is a ranking Commander of the service!"

The ranking Commander spoke quietly. "You shall have your burial, Mr Boma… if our friends permit it." McCoy, still smarting in Spock's behalf, moved over to him.

Landing party Two had beamed back to the *Enterprise* from Taurus II with casualties—one crewman dead, two wounded.

"Lieutenant Kelowitz, what happened?"

Kirk had activated the computer screen at Spock's station. Now it held the smudged, scratched image of the landing party's leader.

Kirk could see that his uniform was torn.

"We were attacked, sir. Huge, furry creatures. I checked with astral anthropology. Order 480G, anthropoid, similar to life forms discovered on Hansen's planet—but much larger. Ten, twelve feet in height…"

"Your casualties?"

"Ensign O'Neill was speared even before we knew they were around. Crewman Immamura has a dislocated shoulder and severe lacerations, but he'll make it all right." The tired eyes on the screen were lost momentarily to horrified recollection of the monster anthropoids. "Captain, they're all over the place. If the *Galileo* is down on that planet…"

Kirk nodded. "Thank you, Lieutenant. You'd better report to Sickbay yourself."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The image faded—and Ferris strode out of the elevator, his jaw set. "Captain Kirk, if you will check your chronometer, you will see it is exactly 2823.8. Your time is up."

"Commissioner, my men are still out there," Kirk said.

"So are the plague victims on New Paris! I now assume the authority granted me under Title Fifteen, Galactic Emergency Procedures. I order you to abandon search, Captain."

Kirk said, "Shuttlecraft *Columbus* hasn't returned yet. I also have two search parties still out."

"You have your orders, Captain. Recall your search parties and proceed to Makus III immediately."

He was beaten.

His voice was inflectionless as he spoke to Uhura. "Lieutenant, order the Transporter Room to beam up the search parties still on the surface. Attempt contact with the *Columbus*."

"I'm in partial contact with them now, sir."

"Have them return at once." He left the computer station to return to his command chair. "Mr Sulu, prepare to abandon search. Set course for Makus III."

Ferris left the bridge—and Kirk slumped back in his chair. There was nothing more to do, nothing more to say. Spock, McCoy, Scott—all dead, mercifully dead on that savage planet. Had their deaths been easy? Hardly. Uhura had to tell him twice that the sensor beams were working again.

No time to mourn. No time, period.

"The other systems?" he said to Uhura.

"No, sir. Still too much interference."

Sulu said, "Course set for Makus III, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr Sulu. Steady on post. Lieutenant Uhura, how long before the *Columbus* comes aboard?"

"Twenty-three minutes, sir.".

"Twenty-three minutes," Kirk said. Then, leaning his arms on his console, he cupped his chin in his hands.

Yeoman Mears, no longer fresh-faced, but tired and worn, had failed again to contact the *Enterprise*, She snapped closed her communicator. "Nothing, sir," she told Spock. "Just ionic interference."

He went to Scott. "How about weight?"

Scott finished draining the last phaser. He looked up as he laid it aside. "If we shed every extra ounce of it, we may be able to achieve orbit."

"How long can we keep it?"

"A few hours. If we time it right, we could cut out of orbit with enough fuel for a controlled reentry."

"To land here again? Not an attractive possibility."

"We have very few alternatives," Scott said. He stooped to remove the drained phasers from the aisle as Boma and McCoy came from the aft compartment, carrying Gaetano's body.

"How does it look outside?" McCoy asked.

Spock glanced out the forward window. Then he spoke to Scott. "When can we lift off, Mr Scott?"

"Maybe eight minutes if the weight's right."

Spock faced around from the window. "Doctor, Mr Boma, the ship will lift off in exactly ten minutes. You have that long to bury Mr Gaetano. It appears to be all clear outside, at least for the moment." He cautiously opened the hatch, peering around the crater. As he turned back inside, he said, "I shall assist you. Please hurry."

Yeoman Mears moved down the aisle to where Scott, at the control console, was warming up its equipment. "Can we get off?" she said.

"Oh, we can get off all right, lassie. But can we stay off? That's the question."

"If we make orbit, the *Enterprise* will—"

"By now," he said, "the *Enterprise* should be well on its way to Makus III."

"Then… we're alone."

"Not alone." He made a gesture toward the crater walls. "We've got some big hairy things out there to keep us company."

It was the thought of the big, hairy things that had brought Kirk to his decision. He uncupped his chin from his hands. "Mr Sulu, proceed on course as ordered for Makus III. At space normal speed."

Sulu was startled. "But all systems report secured for warp factors, sir. Space normal speed?"

"You heard me, Mr Sulu. Lieutenant Uhura, order all sensor sections to direct beams aft, full function, continuous operation until further orders."

Ferris, the paper man, had not specified warp speed.

They'd dug the grave in the spongy soil. It was as they were filling the hole that they all heard the grating sound. Then from the mist-shrouded rocks above them came a piercing howl—a triumphant, roar as though the thing which had uttered it was beating its furry chest in token of victory.

"Into the ship!" Spock shouted: "Take-off immediate!"

A spear struck the grave. Another one grazed Boma's shoulder. Then the air was thick with them. Spock, racing toward the ship, saw a large axe of strange shape hit the ground. As he reached for it, a rock, hurtling down, crashed against his thigh. He struggled to rise but the wounded leg went out from under him. Dragging himself toward the ship, he yelled, "Lift off! Lift off!"

Boma and McCoy were at the open hatch. They left it to run to him. He waved them back furiously. "No! Get back! *Lift off!*"

They disobeyed. McCoy grabbed his shoulders—and a spear whizzed past his head. Half-carrying, half-pulling, they got Spock to the hatch and shoved him inside. Boma slammed it shut just as a giant body heaved at the craft, rocking it,

Spock, clutching his injured leg, glared at his rescuers. "I told you to lift off!"

McCoy, at work on the leg, said, "Don't be a fool, Spock. We couldn't leave you out there!" He paused. Once more, big rocks were hammering at the hull. Spock pushed McCoy away. "Can we lift off, Mr Scott?"

"We should be able to—but we're not moving!"

Yeoman Mears screamed. In the port window beside her a bestial face, enormous, red-eyed was peering in at her. McCoy slammed the shutter down over the window. Spock was hobbling toward the console's seat. For a moment his delicate fingers flitted over the controls.

"They seem to be holding us down," he said. "All systems are go—but we're not moving." His hand went out to another switch. Appalled, Scott cried, "What are you doing, man?"

"The boosters."

"We won't be able to hold orbit!"

Spock moved the switch. The ship bucked. Needles quivered on the console. There was a last defiant crash on the hull, screams of baffled hate—and the *Galileo* shot up and out of the crater.

Yeoman Mears burst into tears of relief. "We're rid of them… of that terrible place…"

Spock spoke. "I must remind you all that we have yet to achieve orbit. Nor can we maintain it long. An hour from now we might well be right back where we started."

But Spock's warning couldn't depress the hope roused by the familiar sight of star-filled space. McCoy, thoughtfully regarding the straight back in the console's seat, said, "Spock—back there—what held you back when we were attacked?"

"A most intriguing artifact… a hand axe, Doctor, reminiscent of those used by the Lake People of Athos IV."

"Even if you'd gotten it, you couldn't have brought it back with you. It must have weighed a hundred and fifty pounds."

Spock looked around from the console, his face astounded. "You know, Doctor, until this moment, that never occurred to me."

McCoy grunted. "An encouraging sign of humanity. It was a fool thing to do. It almost got you killed. If we hadn't come after you…"

"By coming after me you caused a delay in our lift off. So you may well have destroyed what slim chance you have of survival. The logical thing was to leave me behind."

McCoy sighed. "Well, you're back to normal. Remind me to tell you sometime how sick and tired I am of your logic."

"I will, Doctor." He was scanning the console. "Orbit attitude in one minute, Mr Scott. Fuel status?"

"Fifteen pounds psi. Approximately enough for one complete orbit."

"And after that?" McCoy said.

Scott shook his head. "Tapping those boosters removed our last chance of making a soft landing."

"You mean—a burn-up?" asked Boma.

Spock said, "That is the usual end of a decaying orbit."

McCoy got up and went to him. "Spock, can't we do anything?"

He looked up. "The *Enterprise* is undoubtedly back on course for Makus III. I, for one, do not believe in angels. There won't be one around, Doctor, to bear us up on its wings."

"Well, Spock… so ends your first command."

"Yes. My first command."

Scott said, "Orbit attitude attained, Mr Spock. With present fuel that gives us about forty-five minutes."

But Spock seemed singularly uninterested in the information. Nodding slightly, he stared at the console. Then he slowly turned his head to look at the others. They were all back there in their seats… McCoy, the girl, Boma—and Scott, standing by. And all of them, each in his own way, alone with the thought of the final extinction. But their eyes were on him as though he could magically avert it for them. If he'd been a sweating creature, Spock would have been wet with it. Instead, he was a Vulcan by training as well as inheritance, a being required to remain impervious to emotion. Now, in his half-human agony, he took refuge behind a mask of stone. His first and last command. His hand went out toward a switch.

"Spock!" Scott shouted.

He threw the switch. The ship trembled—and a blast of fire burst from its pods.

"What's happened?" cried the girl.

"He's jettisoned the fuel—and ignited it!" Scott yelled.

Boma was on his feet. "Have you gone crazy, Spock?"

"Perhaps, Mr Boma."

McCoy, licking his lips, girded himself for the question. "Scotty, how long do we have?"

"Six minutes."

At Sulu's cry Kirk turned his pain-drawn face. "Yes, Mr Sulu?"

"The screen, Captain! Something's back there! At Taurus II!"

The strain had been too much for all of them. Sulu was hallucinating. "The screen," Kirk said. Then he looked at it. "Sensors, Mr Sulu? A meteorite?"

"No, sir. It's holding a lateral line! There it is again… on the screen. Captain, it's holding steady!"

A streak of flame was moving against the blackness of space.

Kirk exploded into action. "One hundred and eighty degrees about, Mr Sulu! Lieutenant Uhura! Contact Transporter Room! All beams ready! Full normal speed!"

On the screen the flame flickered—and died.

And on the *Galileo* Spock sat unmoving. The heat had begun. He could sense the unbelieving eyes fixed on him—on his Satanic, alien ears. He had destroyed them. He was hardly aware of the hand, the human hand, that suddenly fell on his shoulder.

"Ah, laddie," Scott said, "it was a good gamble. Maybe it was worth it."

Somebody said, "I don't… understand."

Scott whirled. "He turned the ship into a distress signal—a flare!"

Spock said, "Even if there's no one out there to see it."

Scott kept the hand on his shoulder. "The orbit's decaying. Thirty-six seconds to atmosphere."

McCoy joined them. "It may be the last action you ever take, Spock—but it was all human."

"Totally illogical, Doctor. There was no chance."

"Which is exactly what I mean," McCoy said.

A whining sound came. A wisp of smoke drifted from the control panel. Spock, reaching up, slid up the metal shutter on the forward window. The *Galileo* was on fire, glowing red to orange to pure white flame. Its prisoners tore at their throats, coughing as the aisle filled with hot smoke.

Kirk, fingers crossed in the old Earth's plea to Lady Luck, said, "*Activate Transporter beams!*"

Then he waited. A sweating creature, he could feel it breaking from every pore of his body. Sulu said, "Whatever it was, Captain, it just burned up in the atmosphere."

"Yes. I can see for myself, Mr Sulu."

Behind him Uhura leaped from her chair. “Captain! Transporter Room reports five persons aboard! Alive and well!”

“Alive, Lieutenant?”

So the beams had caught them. In the searing heat of the *Galileo*, they had faded, breaking to the dazzle that had brought them home. Kirk covered his face with his hands. Then he lifted his head. “Mr Sulu. Proceed on course for Makus III. Warp factor one.”

“Aye, aye, sir. Warp factor one.”

McCoy was whispering to Kirk. Then they both looked over to the computer station where Spock sat, composed, his eyes intent on his dials.

“Mr Spock?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“When you ignited all your remaining fuel, you knew there was virtually no chance the flame would be seen. But you did it anyhow. Am I correct in defining that as an act of desperation?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Desperation is a highly emotional state of mind. How do you account for it in yourself?”

“Quite simply, sir. I examined the problem from all angles. It was plainly hopeless. Logic informed me that the only possible action would have to be a desperate one. A logical decision, logically arrived at.”

“You mean, you reasoned it was time for an emotional outburst?”

“I would not use those terms, sir, but those are essentially the facts.”

“You’re not going to admit that for once in your life you committed a purely human, emotional act?”

“No, sir.”

“Mr Spock, you are a stubborn man.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kirk got up, started toward him, thought better of it. Grinning, he shook his head, himself accepting the logic of facts as they were. Spock caught the grin. His left eye-brow lifted.

COURT MARTIAL

(Don M. Mankiewicz and Steven W. Carabatsos)

The *Enterprise* weathered the ion storm somehow, but one man was dead, and damage to the ship was considerable. Kirk was forced to order a nonscheduled lay-over for repairs at Star Base 11, a huge complex serving the dual role of graving dock and galactic command outpost.

He made a full report to the portmaster, Senior Captain Stone, a craggy Negro who had once been a flight officer himself; Kirk had known him in those days, though not well. The report, of course, had to include an affidavit in the matter of Records Officer Benjamin Finney, deceased, and Kirk turned that in last and only after long study. Stone noticed his hesitation, but was patient. At last he said, "That makes three times you've read it, Captain. Is there an error?"

"No," Kirk said, "but the death of a crewman? When you have to sign these affidavits, you relive the moment." He signed the paper and passed it to Stone.

"I know. But you can't fight Regulations. Now, let's see; the extract from your ship's computer log, confirming the deposition?"

"In the other folder."

"Good? though it's a great pity too. The service can't afford to lose men like Officer Finney. If he'd only gotten out of the pod in time?"

"I waited until the last possible moment," Kirk said. "The storm got worse. We were on double-red alert. I had to jettison."

The office door swung open suddenly. A young woman was standing there—young, and pretty, but obviously under great stress. She glared wildly at Kirk, who recognized her instantly.

"There you are!" she cried. "I wanted one more good look at you!"

"Jame!"

"Yes, Jame! And you're the man who killed my father!"

"Do you really think that?" Kirk said.

"More than that! I think you deliberately murdered him!"

"Jame, Jame, stop and think what you're saying." Kirk stepped toward her. "We were friends, you know that. I would no more have hurt your father than I'd hurt you."

"Friends! That's a lie! You never were! You hated him, all your life! And you finally killed him!"

Stone, who had been discreetly pretending to study the documents, rose suddenly and moved between them. Jame was obviously fighting back a storm of tears. Kirk watched her in dismay.

"Captain Kirk," Stone said in a voice as hard as his name, "you say you jettisoned the pod *after* the double-red alert?"

"You have my sworn deposition," Kirk said. "Then, Captain, it is my duty to presume you have committed willful perjury. According to the extract from your computer log, you jettisoned the pod *before* the double-red alert. Consider yourself relieved of command. A board of inquiry will determine whether a general court martial is in order."

Kirk never saw the board. As far as he was concerned, the inquiry consisted of Portmaster Stone and a recorder, which was to produce the tape the board would study.

"Where do you want me to begin?" Kirk said.

Stone pushed a cup of coffee toward Kirk. "Tell me about Officer Finney."

"We'd known each other a long time. He was an instructor at the Academy when I was a midshipman. But that didn't stop us from beginning a close friendship. His daughter, Jame, the girl who was in your office last night, was named after me."

"The friendship—it rather cooled with the years, didn't it? No, please speak, Captain, the recorder can't see you nodding."

"Yes, it did. I relieved him on watch once, on the USS *Republic*, and found the vent circuit to the fusion chamber open. If we'd gone under fusion power, the ship would have blown. As it was, it was contaminating the air of the engine room. I closed the switch and logged the error. He drew a reprimand and went to the bottom of the promotion list."

"And he blamed you for that?"

"Yes. He'd been kept on at the Academy as an instructor for an unusually long time. As a result, he was late being assigned to a

starship. He felt the delay looked bad on his record. My action, he believed, made things worse. However, I couldn't very well have let an oversight of that magnitude go unreported."

"Comment by examining officer: Service record of Officer Finney to be appended to this transcript. Now, Captain, let's get to the specifics of the storm."

"Weatherscan indicated an ion storm dead ahead," Kirk said. "I sent Finney into the pod." For the benefit of possible civilians on the board, Kirk added, "The pod is outside the ship, attached to the skin. One of our missions is to get radiation readings in abnormal conditions, including ion storms. This can only be done by direct exposure of the necessary instruments in a plastic pod. However, in a major storm the pod rapidly picks up a charge of its own that becomes a danger to the rest of the ship, and we have to get rid of it."

"Why Finney? If he blamed you?"

"He may have blamed me because he never rose to command rank. But I don't assign jobs on the basis of who blames me, but whose name is on top of the duty roster. It was Finney's turn. He had just checked in with me when we hit the leading edge of the storm. Not bad at first. Then we began encountering field-variance, force two. The works. I finally signaled a double-red alert. Finney knew he had only a matter of seconds. I gave him those seconds, and more—but it wasn't enough. I can't explain his not getting out. He had the training, he had the reflexes, and he had plenty of time."

"Then why, Captain," Stone said, "does the computer log—yours, made automatically at the time—indicate that there was no double-red alert when you jettisoned?"

"I don't know," Kirk said.

"Could the computer be wrong?"

"Mr Spock, my first officer, is running a survey now," Kirk said grimly. "But the odds are next to impossible."

Stone looked at Kirk long and penetratingly, and then reached out and shut off the recorder. "I'm not supposed to do this," he said. "But—look, Kirk. Not one man in a million can do what you and I did: serve as a starship captain. A hundred decisions a day, hundreds of lives staked on every one of them being right. You've been out nineteen months on this last mission. You've taken no furlough, had virtually no rest in all that time. You're played out—exhausted."

Kirk was beginning to get the drift of this, and he did not like it. "That's the way you see it?"

"That's the way my report will read," Stone said, "if you cooperate."

"Physical breakdown," Kirk said. "Possibly even mental collapse."

"Well? yes."

"I'd be admitting that a man died because?"

"Admit nothing," Stone said. "Let me bury the matter, here and now. No starship captain has ever stood trial before. I don't want you to be the first."

"But what if I'm guilty?" Kirk said steadily. "Shouldn't I be punished?"

"I'm thinking of the service, dammit! I won't have it smeared by?"

"By what, Portmaster?"

"All right!" Stone said explosively. "By an evident perjurer who's covering up bad judgment, cowardice, or something even worse!"

"That's as far as you go, Captain," Kirk said, instantly on his feet, "or I'll forget you *are* a captain. I'm telling you, I was on that bridge. I know what happened. I know what I did."

"It's in the transcript," Stone said, equally hotly, "and computer transcripts don't lie. You decide, Captain. Bury the matter and accept a ground assignment—or demand a general court, and bring down on your head the full disciplinary powers of Star Fleet."

"I have already decided," Kirk said. "Turn the recorder back on."

The courtroom was stark. There was one main viewing screen, a recorder, a witness chair, one table each for prosecution and defense, and a high bench where sat Portmaster Stone and the three members of the court-martial board. The prosecutor was a cool, lovely blonde woman named Areel Shaw, who as it happened was an old friend of Kirk's. ("All my old friends look like doctors," Bones McCoy had commented, "and all Jim's old friends look like her.") It was on her advice that Kirk had retained Samuel T. Cogley, a spry old eccentric who put his trust not in computers, but in books. He did not inspire much confidence, though Kirk was convinced that Areel had meant well.

Stone called the court to order by striking an ancient naval ship's bell. "I declare that the General Court of Star Base Eleven is now in session. Captain James T. Kirk will rise. Charge: culpable

negligence. Specification: in that, on Star Date 2947.3, by such negligence, you did cause loss of life, to wit, the life of Records Officer Benjamin Finney. Charge: conduct prejudicial to the good order of the service. Specification: in that, thereafter, you failed accurately to report the same incident in your captain's log. To these charges and specifications, how do you plead?"

"Not guilty," Kirk said quietly.

"I have appointed, as members of this court, Space Command Representative Chandra and Star Command Captains Li Chow and Krasnowsky. I direct your attention to the fact that you have a right to ask for substitute officers if you feel that any of these named harbor prejudice harmful to your case."

"I have no objections, sir."

"And do you consent to the service of Lieutenant Shaw as prosecuting officer, and to my own service as chief judge?"

"Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant Shaw," Stone said, "you may proceed."

Areel Shaw stepped into the arena. "I call Mr Spock."

Spock took the stand and passed to the recorder attendant his identity disk. The recorder promptly said: "Spock, S-179-276-SP. Service rank: commander. Position: first officer, science officer. Current assignment: USS *Enterprise*. Commendations: Vulcan scientific Legion of Honor. Awards of valor: twice decorated by Galactic Command."

"Mr Spock," Areel Shaw said, "as a science officer, you know a great deal about computers, don't you?"

"I know all about them," Spock said levelly.

"Do you know of any possible malfunction that would cause one to recall an event inaccurately?"

"No."

"Or any malfunction that *has* caused an inaccuracy in *this* one?"

"No. Nevertheless, it is inaccurate."

"Please explain."

"It reports," Spock said, "that the jettison button was pressed before the double-red alert—in other words, that Captain Kirk was reacting to an emergency that did not then exist. That is not only illogical, but impossible."

"Were you watching him the exact moment he pressed the button?"

"No. I was occupied. We were already at red-alert."

"Then how can you dispute the record of the log?"

"I do not dispute it," Spock said. "I merely state it to be wrong. I know the captain. He would not?"

"Captain Stone," Areel Shaw said, "please instruct the witness not to speculate."

"Sir," Spock said to Stone, "I am half Vulcan. Vulcans do not speculate. I speak from pure logic. If I let go of a hammer on a high-gravity planet, I do not need to see it fall to know that it has fallen. Human beings have characteristics that determine their behavior just as inanimate objects do. I say it is illogical for Captain Kirk to have reacted to an emergency that did not exist, and impossible for him to act out of panic or malice. That is not his nature."

"In your opinion," Areel Shaw said.

"Yes," Spock said with obvious reluctance. "In my opinion."

The personnel officer of the *Enterprise* was called next. "With reference to Records Officer Finney," Areel asked him, "was there, in his service record, a report of disciplinary action for failure to close a circuit?"

"Yes, ma'am," the P.O. said.

"This charge was based upon a log entry by the officer who relieved him. Who was that officer?"

"Ensign James T. Kirk," the P.O. said softly.

"Speak louder, for the recorder, please. That is now the Captain Kirk who sits in this courtroom?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you. Your witness, Mr Cogley."

"No questions," Cogley said.

Areel next called Bones McCoy to the stand, and went after him with cool efficiency. "Doctor, you are, on the record, an expert in psychology, especially in space psychology—patterns that develop in the close quarters of a ship during long voyages in deep space."

"I know something about it."

"Your academic record, and your experience, doctor, belie your modesty. Is it possible that Officer Finney blamed the defendant for the incident we have just heard your personnel officer describe—blamed him and hated him for being passed over for promotion, blamed him for never having been given a command of his own, hated him for having to serve under him?"

"Of course, it's possible," McCoy said.

"Then, isn't it also possible that all that hatred, directed against Captain Kirk, could have caused a like response in the captain?"

"You keep asking what's possible," McCoy said. "To the human mind almost anything is possible. The fact, however, is that I have never observed such an attitude in Captain Kirk."

"What about an attitude generated in his subconscious mind?"

"I object!" Sam Cogley said. "Counsel is leading the witness into making unprovable subjective speculations."

"On the contrary, your honor," Areel said. "I am asking a known expert in psychology for an expert psychological opinion."

"Objection overruled," Stone said. "You may proceed."

"Captain Kirk, then," Areel said relentlessly, "could have become prejudiced against Officer Finney without having been aware of it —prejudiced in such a way that his judgment became warped. Is that *theoretically* possible, doctor?"

"Yes," McCoy said, "it's possible. But highly unlikely."

"Thank you. Your witness, Mr Cogley."

"No questions."

"Then I call James T. Kirk."

When Kirk's identity disc was placed in the recorder, the machine said: "Kirk, SC-937-0176-CEC. Service rank: captain. Position: starship command. Current assignment: USS *Enterprise*. Commendations: Palm leaf of Axanar peace mission. Grankite order of tactics, class of excellence. Pentares ribbon of commendation, classes first and second?"

"May it please the court," Areel Shaw said. The recorder attendant shut off the machine. "The prosecution concedes the inestimable record of Captain Kirk, and asks consent that it be entered as if read."

"Mr Cogley," Stone said, "do you so consent?"

Cogley smiled disarmingly, stretched a bit in his chair, and rose. "Well, sir," he said, "I wouldn't want to be the one to slow the wheels of progress. On the other hand, I wouldn't want those wheels to run over my client in their unbridled haste. May I point out, sir, that this is a *man* we are examining, so perhaps a little longer look would not be amiss. The court's convenience is important, but his *rights* are paramount."

"Continue," Stone told the recorder attendant. The machine said: "Awards of valor: Medal of Honor, silver palm with cluster. Three times wounded, honor roll. Galactic citation for conspicuous gallantry. Karagite Order of Heroism?"

It took quite a long time, during which Areel Shaw looked at the floor. Kirk could not tell whether she was fuming at having been outmaneuvered, or was simply ashamed of the transparency of her trick. Doubtless she did not want the court to be able to tell, either.

"Now, Captain. Despite the record, you continue to maintain that there was a double-red alert before you jettisoned the pod?"

"Yes, ma'am. There was."

"And you cannot explain why the computer record shows otherwise."

"No, I cannot."

"And in fact you'd do it again under the same circumstances."

"Objection!" Cogley said. "Counsel is now asking the witness to convict himself in advance of something he hasn't done yet and, we maintain, didn't do in the past!"

"It's all right, Sam," Kirk said. "I'm willing to answer. Lieutenant Shaw, I have been trained to command. The training doesn't sharpen a man's verbal skills. But it does sharpen his sense of duty —and confidence in himself to discharge that duty."

"May it please the court," Areel Shaw said, "I submit that the witness is not being responsive."

"He's answering the question," Stone said, "and he has a right to explain his answers. Proceed, Captain Kirk."

"Thank you, sir. We were in the worst kind of ion storm. And I was in command. I made a judgment—a command judgment. And because it was necessary to make that judgment, a man died. But the lives of my entire crew and my ship were in danger, and *not* to have made that judgment, to wait, to have been indecisive when it was time to act, would in my mind have been criminal. I did not act out of panic, or malice. I did what I was duty-bound to do. And of course, Lieutenant Shaw, I would do it again; that is the responsibility of command."

There was a brief hush. Areel Shaw broke it at last, turning to Stone.

"Your honor, the prosecution does not wish to dishonor this man. But I must invite the court's attention now to the visual playback of the log extract of the *Enterprise's* computer."

"It is so ordered."

The main viewing screen lit up. When it was over, Areel Shaw said, almost sadly, "If the court will notice the scene upon which we froze, the screen plainly shows the defendant's ringer pressing

the jettison button. The condition signal reads RED-ALERT. Not double-red—but simply red. When the pod containing Officer Finney was jettisoned, the emergency did not as yet exist.

"The prosecution rests."

Thunderstruck, Kirk stared at the screen. He had just seen the impossible.

During the recess, Sam Cogley calmly leafed through legal books in the room assigned to them, while Kirk paced the floor in anger and frustration.

"I know what I did!" Kirk said. "That computer report is an outright impossibility."

"Computers don't lie," Cogley said.

"Sam, are you suggesting *I* did?"

"I'm suggesting that maybe you did have a lapse. It's possible, with the strain you were under. Jim, there's still time to change our plea. I could get you off."

"Two days ago, I would have staked my life on my judgment."

"You did. Your professional life."

"*I know what I did*," Kirk said, spacing each word. "But if you want to pull out?"

"There's nowhere to go," Cogley said. "Except back into court in half an hour. The verdict's a foregone conclusion, unless we change our plea."

Kirk's communicator beeped and he took it out. "Kirk here."

"Captain," Spock's voice said, "I have run a full survey on the computer."

"I'll tell you what you found," Kirk said. "Nothing."

"You sound bitter."

"Yes, Mr Spock. I am. But not so bitter as to fail to thank you for your efforts."

"My duty, Captain. Further instructions?" There actually seemed to be emotion in Spock's voice, but if he felt any such stirring, he was unable to formulate it.

"No. I'm afraid you'll have to find yourself a new chess partner, Mr Spock. Over and out."

Cogley gathered up an armful of books and started for the door. "I've got to go to a conference in chambers with Stone and Shaw."

"Look," Kirk said. "What I said before—I was a little worked up. You did the best you could."

Cogley nodded and opened the door. Behind it, her arm raised to knock, was Jame Finney.

"Jame!" Kirk said. "Sam, this is Officer Finney's daughter."

"A pleasure," Cogley said.

"Mr Cogley," she said, "you have to stop this. Make him change his plea. Or something. Anything. I'll help if I can."

Sam Cogley looked slightly perplexed, but he said only, "I've tried."

"It's too late for anything like that, Jame," Kirk said. "But I appreciate your concern."

"It can't be too late. Mr Cogley, my father's dead. Ruining Jim won't bring him back."

"That's a commendable attitude, Miss Finney," Cogley said. "But a little unusual, isn't it? After all, Captain Kirk is accused of *causing* your father's death."

"I was?" Jame said, and stopped. She seemed suddenly nervous. "I was just thinking of Jim."

"Thank you, Jame," Kirk said. "But I'm afraid we've had it. You'd better go."

When the door closed, Cogley put his books down. "How well do you know that girl?" he said.

"Since she was a child."

"Hmm. I suppose that might explain her attitude. Curious, though. Children don't usually take such a dispassionate view of the death of a parent."

"Oh, she didn't at first. She was out for my blood. Almost hysterical. Charged into Stone's office calling me a murderer."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"Why," Kirk said, "the subject never came up. Is it important?"

"I don't know," Cogley said thoughtfully. "It's—a false note, that's all. I don't see what use we could put it to now."

Stone rang the court to order. He had hardly done so when Spock and McCoy materialized squarely in the midst of the room—a hair-raisingly precise piece of transporter work. They moved directly to Kirk and Cogley; the latter stood and Spock whispered to him urgently.

"Mr Cogley," Stone said harshly, "what's the meaning of this display?"

"May it please the court," Mr Cogley said, "we mean no disrespect, but these officers have unearthed new evidence, and they could conceive of no way to get it to the court in time but by this method."

"The counsel for the defense," Areel Shaw said, "has already rested his case. Mr Cogley is well-known for his theatrics?"

"Is saving an innocent man's life a theatric?" He turned to Stone. "Sir, my client has been deprived of one of his most important rights in this trial—the right to be confronted by the witnesses against him. *All* the witnesses, your honor. And the most devastating witness against my client is not a human being, but an information system—a machine."

"The excerpt from the computer log has been shown."

"Your honor, a log excerpt is not the same as the machine that produced it. I ask that this court adjourn and reconvene on board the *Enterprise* itself."

"I object, your honor," Areel Shaw said. "He's trying to turn this into a circus."

"Yes!" Cogley said. "A circus! Do you know what the first circus was, Lieutenant Shaw? An arena, where men met danger face to face, and lived or died. This is indeed a circus. In this arena, Captain Kirk will live or die, for if you take away his command he will be a dead man. But he has not met his danger face to face. He has the right to confront his accuser, and it matters nothing that his accuser is a machine. If you do not grant him that right, you have not only placed us on a level with the machine—you have elevated the machine above us! Unless I am to move for a mistrial, I ask that my motion be granted. But more than that, gentlemen: In the name of humanity fading in the shadow of the machine, I demand it. I demand it!"

The members of the board put their heads together. At last Stone said: "Granted."

"Mr Spock," Cogley said. "How many chess games did you play with the computer during recess?"

"Five."

"And the outcome?"

"I won them all."

"May that be considered unusual, Mr Spock, and if so, why?"

"Because I myself programed the computer to play chess. It knows my game; and as has been observed before, it cannot make an error. Hence, even if I myself never make an error, the best I can hope to achieve against it is a stalemate. I have been able to win against Captain Kirk now and then, but against the computer, never—until now. It therefore follows that someone has adjusted either the chess programing or the memory banks. The latter would be the easier task."

"I put it to you, Mr Spock, that even the latter would be beyond the capacity of most men, isn't that so? Well, then, what men, aboard ship, would it *not* be beyond?"

"The captain, myself—and the Records Officer."

"Thank you, you may step down. I now call Captain Kirk. Captain, describe what steps you took to find Officer Finney after the storm."

"When he did not respond to my call," Kirk said, "I ordered a phase-one search for him. Such a search assumes that its object is injured and unable to respond to the search party."

"It also presupposes that the man *wishes to be found?*"

"Of course, Sam."

"Quite. Now, with the court's permission, although Mr Spock is now in charge of this ship, I am going to ask Captain Kirk to describe what Mr Spock has done, to save time, which you will see in a moment is a vital consideration. May I proceed?"

"Well? All right."

"Captain?"

"Mr Spock has ordered everybody but the members of this court and the command crew to leave the ship. This includes the engine crew. Our impulse engines have been shut down and we are maintaining an orbit by momentum alone."

"And when the orbit begins to decay?" Stone said.

"We hope to be finished before that," Cogley said. "But that is the vital time element I mentioned. Captain, is there any other step Mr Spock has taken?"

"Yes, he has rigged an auditory sensor to the log computer. In effect, it will now be able to hear—as will we—every sound occurring on this ship."

"Thank you. Dr McCoy to the stand, please. Doctor, I see you have a small device with you. What is it, please?"

"It is a white-noise generator."

"I see. All right, Mr Spock."

At the console, Spock turned a switch. The bridge at once shuddered to an intermittent pounding, like many drums being beaten.

"Could you reduce the volume a little?" Cogley said. "Thank you. Your honor, that sound is caused by the heartbeats of all the people in this room. With your permission, I am going to ask Dr McCoy to take each person's pulse, and then use the white-noise device to mask those pulse beats out, so they will be eliminated from the noise we are hearing."

"What is the purpose of this rigmarole, your honor?" Areel Shaw demanded.

"I think you suspect that as well as I do, Lieutenant," Stone said. "Proceed, Dr McCoy."

As Bones moved from person to person, the eerie multiple thumping became simpler, softer.

"That's all," McCoy said.

No one breathed. Faintly, somewhere, one beat still sounded.

"May it please the court," Cogley said quietly, "the remaining pulse you hear, I think we will shortly find, is that of Officer Finney. Mr Spock, can you localize it?"

"B deck, between sections 18Y and 27D. I have already sealed off that section."

Kirk hesitated, then came to a decision. "Captain Stone," he said, "this is my problem. I would appreciate it if no one would leave the bridge."

As he turned to leave, Spock handed him a phaser. "The weapons room is within those quadrants, sir," he said quietly. "He may be armed. This is already set on stun."

"Thank you, Mr Spock."

He moved cautiously down the corridor in the sealed section, calling at intervals: "All right, Ben. It's all over. Ben! Officer Finney!"

For a while there was no answer. Then, suddenly, a figure stepped out of a shadow, phaser leveled.

"Hello, Captain," Officer Finney said.

Kirk found that he could not answer. Though he had been sure that this was the solution, the emotional impact of actually being

face to face with the "dead" man was unexpectedly powerful. Finney smiled a hard smile.

"Nothing to say, Captain?"

"Yes," Kirk said. "I'm glad to see you alive."

"You mean you're relieved because your precious career is saved. Well, you're wrong. You've just made things worse for everyone."

"Put the phaser down, Ben. Why go on with it?"

"You wouldn't leave it alone," Finney said. "You've taken away my choices. Officers and gentlemen, commanders all? except for Finney and his one mistake.

A long time ago, but they don't forget. No, they never forget."

"Ben, I logged that mistake of yours. Blame me, not them."

"But they're to blame," Finney said. "All of them. I was a good officer. I really was. I loved the service like no man ever did."

Slowly, Kirk began to move in on him.

"Stand back, Captain. No more—I warn you—"

"You're sick, Ben. We can help you—"

"One more step—"

Suddenly, Jame's voice cried down the corridor, "Father! *Father!*"

Finney's head jerked around. With a quick lunge, Kirk knocked the phaser from his hand. At the same moment, Jame appeared, rushing straight into the distraught man's arms.

"Jame!"

"It's all right, father," she said, moving her hand over the tortured officer's brow. "It's all right."

"Don't, Jame," he said. "You've got to understand. I had to do it? after what they did to me?"

"Excuse me," Kirk said. "But if we don't get this ship back under power, we'll all be dead."

"Mr Cogley," Stone said, "while this trial is obviously not over yet, I think we must congratulate you and Mr Spock and Dr McCoy for a truly classical piece of detective work. Would you tell us, please, how the idea that Officer Finney was still alive even entered your head?"

"I began to suspect that, your honor, when Captain Kirk told me about the change of heart Officer Finney's daughter had had about

the captain. If she knew he wasn't dead, she had no reason to blame the Captain for anything."

"But how could she know that?" Stone asked.

"She had been reading her father's papers. Perhaps she didn't know the facts, but the general tone of what he had written must have gotten through to her. A man suffering delusions of persecution wants to set down his com plaints. She read them; she knew from childhood the kind of man the captain is; and she's fundamentally fair and decent."

He paused and looked soberly over toward Kirk.

"Or maybe," he said, "it was just instinct. Thank God, there's that much of the animal left in us. Whatever it was, the result is that she now has back both her father and her childhood friend."

"Her father," Stone said, "will also have to stand trial."

"I know that," Cogley said quietly. "I ask the court to appoint me his defense counsel. And off the record, your honor, I have the feeling I'll win."

"Off the record," Stone said, "I wouldn't be a bit surprised."

THE MENAGERIE*

(Gene Roddenberry)

*As originally produced, this story ran in two parts. The main story, which takes place so far back in the history of the *Enterprise* that the only familiar face aboard her then was Spock, appeared surrounded by and intercut with an elaborate "framing" story, in which Spock is up for court-martial on charges of mutiny and offers the main story as an explanation of his inarguably mutinous behavior. Dramatically, this was highly effective—indeed, as I've already noted, it won a "Hugo" award in this category for that year—but told as fiction, it involves so many changes of viewpoint, as well as so many switches from present to past, that it becomes impossibly confusing. (I know—I've tried!) Hence the present version adapts only the main story, incidentally restoring to it the ending it had—never shown on television—before the frame was grafted onto it. I think the producers also came to feel that the double-plotted version had been a mistake; at least, "The Menagerie" turned out to be the only two-part episode in the entire history of the series.—J. B.

When the distress signal from Talos IV came through, via old-fashioned radio, Captain Christopher Pike was of two minds about doing anything about it. The message said it was from survivors of the SS *Columbia,* and a library search by Spock showed that a survey ship of that name had indeed disappeared in that area—eighteen years ago. It had taken all of those years for the message, limited to the speed of light, to reach the *Enterprise,* which passed through its wave-front just slightly eighteen light-years from the Talos system. A long time ago, that had been.

In addition, Pike had his own crew to consider. Though the *Enterprise* had come out of the fighting around Rigel VIII—her maiden battle—unscarred, the ground skirmishing had not been as kind to her personnel. Spock, for example, was limping, though he was trying to minimize it, and Navigator Jose Tyler's left forearm was bandaged down to his palm. Pike himself was unhurt, but he felt desperately tired.

Nevertheless, the library also reported Talos IV to be habitable, so survivors from the *Columbia* might still be alive; and since the *Enterprise* would be passing within visual scanning distance anyhow, it wouldn't hurt to take a look. The chances of finding anything at this late date…

But almost at once, Tyler picked up reflections from the planet's surface whose polarization and scatter pattern indicated large, rounded chunks of metal, which might easily have been parts of a spaceship's hull. Pike ordered the *Enterprise* into orbit.

"I'll want a landing party of six, counting myself. Mr Tyler, you'll be second in command, and we'll need Mr Spock too; both of you, see that there's a fresh dressing on your wounds. Also, Dr Boyce, Chief Garrison and ship's geologist. Number One, you're in command of the *Enterprise* in our absence. Who seconds you now?"

"Yeoman Colt, sir."

Pike hesitated. That this left the bridge dominated by women didn't bother him; female competence to be in Star Fleet had been tested and proven before he had been born. And Pike had the utmost confidence in Number One, ordinarily the ship's helmsman and, after the Rigel affair, the most experienced surviving officer. Slim and dark in a Nile Valley sort of way, she was one of those women who always look the same between the ages of twenty and fifty, but she had a mind like the proverbial steel trap and Pike had never seen her shaken in any situation. Yeoman Colt, however, was a recent replacement, and an unknown quantity. Well, the assignment was likely to prove a routine one, anyhow.

"Very well. We'll beam down to the spot where Mr Tyler picked up those reflections."

This proved to be on a rocky plateau, not far from an obvious encampment—a rude collection of huts, constructed out of slabs of rock, debris from a spaceship hull, scraps of canvas and other odds and ends. Several fairly old men were visible, all bearded, all wearing stained and tattered garments. One was carrying water; the others were cultivating a plot of orange vegetation. The ingenuity and resolute will which had enabled them to exist for nearly two decades on this forbidding alien world were everywhere evident.

One of them looked up in the direction of the landing party and froze, clearly unable to believe his eyes. At last he called hoarsely, "Winter! *Look!*"

A second man looked up, and reacted almost as the first had. Then he shouted; "They're men! Human!"

The sound of their voices brought other survivors out of their huts and sheds. The youngest looked to be nearly fifty, but they were tanned, hardened, in extraordinarily good health. The two groups approached each other slowly, solemnly; Pike could almost feel the intensity of emotion. He stepped forward and extended a hand.

"Captain Christopher Pike, United Spaceship *Enterprise.*"

The first survivor to speak mutely accepted Pike's hand, tears on his face. At last he said, with obvious effort, "Dr Theodore Haskins, American Continent Institute."

"They're *men!* Here to take us back!" the man called Winter said, laughing with sudden relief. "You are, aren't you? Is Earth all right?"

"Same old Earth," Pike said, smiling. "You'll see it before long."

"And you won't believe how fast you can get back," Tyler added. "The time barrier's been broken! Our new ships can…"

He broke off, mouth open, staring past Haskins' shoulder. Following the direction of the navigator's gaze, Pike saw standing in a hut doorway a remarkably beautiful young woman. Although her hair was uncombed and awry, her makeshift dress tattered, she looked more like a woodland nymph than the survivor of a harrowing ordeal. Motioning her forward, Haskins said, "This is Vina. Her parents are dead; she was born almost as we crashed."

There were more introductions all around, but Pike found himself almost unable to take his eyes off the girl. Perhaps it was only the contrast she made with the older men, but her young, animal grace was striking. No wonder Tyler had stared.

"No need to prolong this," Pike said. "Collect what personal effects you want to keep and we'll be off. I suggest you concentrate on whatever records you have; the *Enterprise* is amply stocked with necessities, and even some luxuries."

"Extraordinary," Haskins said. "She must be a very big vessel."

"Our largest and most modern type; the crew numbers four hundred and thirty."

Haskins shook his head in amazement and bustled off. Amidst all the activity, Vina approached Pike and drew him a little to one side.

"Captain, may I have a word?"

"Of course, Vina."

"Before we go, there is something you should see. Something of importance."

"Very well. What is it?"

"It's much easier to show than to explain. If you'll come this way…"

She led him to a rocky knoll some distance from the encampment, and pointed to the ground at its base. "There it is."

Pike did not know what he had expected—anything from a grave to some sort of alien artifact—but in fact he saw nothing of interest at all, and said so. Vina looked disappointed.

"The angle of the light is probably wrong," she said. "Come around to this side."

They changed places, so that his back was to the knoll, hers to the encampment. As far as Pike could tell, this made no difference.

"I don't understand," he said.

"You will," Vina said, the tone of her voice changing suddenly. "You're a perfect choice."

Pike looked up sharply. As he did so, the girl vanished.. It was not the fading dematerialization of the Transporter effect; she simply blinked out as though someone had snapped off a light. With her went all the survivors and their entire encampment, leaving nothing behind but the bare plateau and the stunned men from the *Enterprise.*

There was a hiss behind him and he spun, reaching for his phaser. A cloud of white gas was rolling toward him, through which he could see an oddly shaped portal which, perfectly camouflaged as a part of the rock, had noiselessly opened to reveal the top of a lift shaft. He had an instant's impression of two occupants—small, slim, pale, humanlike creatures with large elongated heads, in shimmering metallic robes; one of them was holding a small cylinder which was still spitting the white spray.

In the same instant, the gas hit him and he was paralyzed, still conscious but unable to move anything but his eyes. The two creatures stepped forward and dragged him into the opening.

"*Captain!*" Spock's voice shouted in the distance. Then there was the sound of running, suddenly muffled as though the doors had closed again, and then the lift dropped with a hissing *whoosh* like that of a high-speed pneumatic tube. Above, and still more distantly, came the sound of a rock explosion as someone fired a phaser at full power, but the hit simply fell faster.

With it, Pike fell into unconsciousness.

He awoke clawing for his own phaser, a spongelike surface impeding his movements. The gun was gone. Rolling to his feet, he looked around, at the same time reaching next for his communicator. That was gone too; so was his jacket.

He was in a spotless utilitarian enclosure. The spongy surface turned out to belong to a plastic shape, apparently a sort of bed, with a filmy metallic-cloth blanket folded on it. There was also a free-form pool of surging water, with a small drinking container sitting on the floor next to it. A prison cell, clearly; the bars…

But there were no bars. The fourth wall was made up entirely of a transparent panel. Pike hurried to it and peered through. He found himself looking up and down a long corridor, faced with similar panels; but they were offset to, rather than facing each other, so that Pike could see into only small angled portions of the two nearest him on the other side.

Some sound he had made must have penetrated into the corridor, for suddenly there was a wild snarl, and in the cell—cage?—to his left, a flat creature, half anthropoid, half spider, rushed hungrily at him, only to be thrown back, its ugly fangs clattering against the transparency. Startled, Pike looked to the right; in this enclosure he could see a portion of some kind of tree. Then there was a leathery flapping, and an incredibly thin humanoid/bird creature came into view, peering curiously but shyly toward Pike's cage. The instant it saw Pike watching, it whirled and vanished.

As it did, a group of the pale, large-headed men like those who had kidnapped him came into view, coming toward him. They were lead by one who wore an authoritative-looking jeweled pendant on a short chain around his neck. They all came to a halt hi front of Pike's cage, silently watching him. He studied them in turn. They were quite bald, all of them, and each had a prominent vein across his forehead.

Finally, Pike said, "Can you hear me? My name is Christopher Pike, commander of the vessel *Enterprise* of the United Federation of Planets. Our intentions are peaceful. Can you understand me?"

The large forehead vein of one of the Talosians pulsed strongly and, although Pike could see no lip movement, a voice sounded in his head, a voice that sounded as though it were reciting something.

"It appears, Magistrate, that the intelligence of the specimen is shockingly limited."

Now the forehead of the creature with the pendant pulsed. "This is no surprise, since his vessel was lured here so easily with a simulated message. As you can read in its thoughts, it is only now beginning to suspect that the survivors and the encampment were a simple illusion we placed in their minds. And you will note the confusion as it reads our thought transmissions…"

"All right, telepathy," Pike broke in. "You can read my mind, I can read yours. Now, unless you want my ship to consider capturing me an unfriendly act…"

"You now see the primitive fear-threat reaction. The specimen is about to boast of his strength, the weaponry of his vessel, and so on." As Pike stepped back a pace and tensed himself, the Magistrate added, "Next, frustrated into a need to display physical prowess, the creature will throw himself against the transparency."

Pike, his act predicted in mid-move, felt so foolish that he canceled it, which made him angrier than ever. He snarled, "There's a way out of every cage, and I'll find it."

"Despite its frustration, the creature appears more adaptable than our specimens from other planets," the Magistrate continued. "We can soon begin the experiment."

Pike wondered what they meant by *that,* but it was already obvious that they were not going to pay any attention to anything he said. He began to pace. The telepathic "voices" continued behind him.

"Thousands of us are now probing the creature's thoughts, Magistrate. We find excellent memory capacity."

"I read most strongly a recent struggle in which it fought to protect its tribal system. We will begin with this, giving the specimen something more interesting to protect."

The cage vanished.

He was standing alone among rocks and strange vegetation which, on second look, proved to be vaguely familiar. Then an unmistakably familiar voice sounded behind him.

"Come. Hurry!"

He turned to see Vina, her hair long and in braids, dressed like a peasant girl of the terrestrial Middle Ages. Behind her towered a fortress which he might have taken as belonging to the same period had he not recognized it instantly. The girl pointed to it and said, "It is deserted. There will be weapons, perhaps food."

"This is Rigel VIII," Pike said slowly. "I fought in that fortress just two weeks ago. But where do you fit in?"

There was a distant bellowing sound. Vina started, then began walking rapidly toward the fortress. Pike remained where he was.

I was in a cell, a cage in some kind of zoo. I'm still there. I just think I see this. They must have reached into my mind, taken the memory of somewhere I've been, something that's happened to me—except that she wasn't in it then.

The bellowing sounded again, nearer. Pike hurried after the girl, catching up with her just inside the gateway to the fortress' courtyard. The place was a scatter of battered shields, lance staves, nicked and snapped swords; there was even a broken catapult—the debris that had been left behind after Pike's own force had breached and reduced the fortress. Breaking the Kalars' hold over their serfs had been a bloody business, and made more so by the hesitancy of Starfleet Command over whether the whole operation was not in violation of General Order Number One. Luckily, the Kalars themselves had solved that by swarming in from Rigel X in support of their degenerate colony…

And that animal roar of rage behind them could only be a stray Kalar colonist, seeking revenge for the fall of his fortress and his feudalism upon anything in his path. Vina was looking desperately for a weapon amid the debris, but there was nothing here she could even lift.

Then the bellow sounded at the gateway. Vina shrank into the nearest shadow, pulling Pike with her. He was in no mood to hang back; memory was too strong. The figure at the courtyard entry was a local Kalar warrior, huge, hairy, Neanderthal, clad in cuirass and helmet and carrying a mace. It looked about, shoulders hunched.

"What nonsense," Pike said under his breath. "It was all over weeks ago…"

"*Hush,*" Vina whispered, terrified. "You've been here—you know what he'll do to us."

"It's nothing but a damn silly illusion."

The warrior roared again, challengingiy, raising tremendous echoes. Apparently he hadn't seen them yet.

"It doesn't matter *what* you call this," Vina whispered again. "You'll feel it, that's what matters. You'll feel every moment of whatever happens. I'll feel it happening too."

The warrior moved tentatively toward them. Either in genuine panic or to force Pike's hand, Vina whirled and raced for a parapet

stairway behind them which lead toward the battlement above. The Kalar spotted her at once; Pike had no choice but to follow.

At the top was another litter of weapons; Vina had already picked up a spear with a head like an assegai. Pike found himself a shield and an unbroken sword. As he straightened, the girl pushed him aside. A huge round rock smashed into the rampart wall inches away from him, the force of the fragments knocking him down.

The pain was real, all right. He raised a hand to his forehead to find it bleeding. Below, the warrior was picking up another rock from a depleted pile on the other side of the catapult.

While Pike scrambled back, Vina threw her spear, but she did it inexpertly, and in any event her strength proved insufficient for the range. Changing his mind at once, the Kalar dropped the stone and came charging up the stairs.

Pike's shield was almost torn from his arm at the first blow of the mace. His own sword clanged harmlessly against the Kalar's armor, and he was driven back by a flurry of blows.

Then there was a twanging sound. The warrior bellowed in pain and swung around, revealing an arrow driven deep into his back. Vina had found a crossbow, cocked and armed, and at that range she couldn't miss.

But the wound wasn't immediately mortal and she obviously did not know how to cock the weapon again. The Kalar, staggering, moved in upon her.

From that close, a crossbow bolt would go through almost any armor, but Pike's sword certainly wouldn't. Dropping it, he sprang forward, raised his shield high, and brought it down with all his strength on the back of the warrior's neck. The creature spun off the rampart edge and plummeted to the floor of the compound below. It struck supine and lay still.

Vina, sobbing with relief, threw herself into Pike's arms…

? and they were back in the menagerie cage.

She was now wearing her own, shorter hair, and a simple garment of the metallic Talosian material. His own bruises and exhaustion had vanished completely, along with the shield. It took him a startled moment to realize what had happened.

Vina smiled. "It's over."

"Why are you here?" he demanded.

She hesitated slightly, then smiled again. "To please you."

"Are you real?"

"As real as you wish."

"That's no answer," he said.

"Perhaps they've made me up out of dreams you've forgotten."

He pointed to her garment. "And I dreamed of you in the same metal fabric they wear?"

"I must wear something." She came closer, "or must I? I can wear anything you wish, be anything you wish…"

"To make this 'specimen' perform for them? To watch how I react? Is that it?"

"Don't you have a dream, something you've wanted very badly…"

"Do they do more than just watch me?" he asked. "Do they *feel* with me too?"

"You can have any dream you wish. I can become anything. Any woman you ever imagined." She tried to nestle closer. "You can go anyplace, do anything—have any experience from the whole universe. Let me please you."

Pike eyed her speculatively. "You can," he said abruptly. "Tell me about them. Is there some way I can keep them from using my own thoughts against me?,Ah, you're frightened. Does that mean there *is* a way?"

"You're being a fool."

He nodded. "You're right. Since you insist you're an illusion, there's not much point in this conversation."

He went over to the bed and lay down, ignoring her. It was not hard to sense her anxiety, however. Whatever her task was, she did not want to fail it.

After a while she said, "Perhaps—if you asked me something I could answer…"

He sat up. "How far can they control my mind?"

"That's not a—that is—" she paused. "If I tell you—will you pick some dream you've had, let me live it with you?"

Pike considered this. The information seemed worth the risk. He nodded.

"They—they can't actually make you do anything you don't want to."

"They have to try to trick me with their illusions?"

"Yes. And they can punish when you're not cooperative. You'll find out about that."

"They must have lived on the planet's surface once…"

"Please," she interrupted. "If I say too much…"

"Why did they move underground?" he pressed insistently.

"War, thousands of centuries ago," she said hurriedly. "The ones left on the surface destroyed themselves and almost their whole world too. It's taken that long for the planet to heal itself."

"And I suppose the ones who came underground found life too limited—so they concentrated on developing their mental power."

She nodded. "But they've found it's a trap. Like a narcotic. When dreams become more important than reality, you give up travel, building, creating, you even forget how to repair the machines left behind by your ancestors. You just sit living and reliving other lives in the thought records. Or probe the minds of zoo specimens, descendants of life they brought back long ago from all over this part of the galaxy."

Pike suddenly understood. "Which means they had to have more than one of each animal."

"Yes," Vina said, clearly frightened now. "Please, you said if I answered your questions…"

"But that was a bargain with something that didn't exist. You said you were an illusion, remember."

"I'm a woman," she said, angry now. "As real and human as you are. We're—like Adam and Eve. If they can…"

She broke off with a scream and dropped to the floor, writhing.

"Please!" she wailed. "Don't punish me—I'm trying my best with him—no, *please*…"

In the midst of her agony, she vanished. Pike looked up to see the creature called the Magistrate watching through the panel. Furiously, he turned his back—and noticed for the first time an almost invisible circular seam, about man-high, in the wall beside his bed. Was there a hidden panel there?

A small clink of sound behind him made him turn again. A vial of blue liquid was sitting on the floor, just inside the transparency. The Magistrate continued to watch; his mental speech said, "The vial contains a nourishing protein complex."

"Is the keeper actually communicating with one of his animals?"

"If the form and color are not appealing, it can appear as any food you wish to visualize."

"And if I prefer—" Pike began.

"To starve? You overlook the unpleasant alternative of punishment."

With the usual suddenness, Pike found himself writhing in bubbling, sulphurous brimstone in a dark place obscured by smoke. Flame licked at him from all sides. The instant agony was as real as the surprise, and a scream was wrenched from him.

It lasted only a few seconds and then he was back in the cage, staggering.

"From a fable you once heard in childhood," the Magistrate said. "You will now consume the nourishment."

"Why not just put irresistable—hunger in my mind?" Pike said, still gasping with remembered pain. "You can't—do that. You do have limitations, don't you?"

"If you continue to disobey, deeper in your mind there are things even more unpleasant."

Shakily, Pike picked up the vial and swallowed its contents. Almost simultaneously he tossed the vial aside and threw himself at the transparency. It bounced him back, of course—but the Magistrate had also stepped back a pace.

"That's very interesting," Pike said. "You were startled. Weren't you reading my mind then?"

"Now, to the female. As you have conjectured, an Earth vessel did actually crash on our planet. But with only a single survivor."

"Let's stay on the first subject. All I wanted for that moment was to get my hands around your neck. Do primitive emotions put up a block you can't read through?"

"We repaired the survivor's injuries and found the species interesting. So it became necessary to attract a mate."

"All right, we'll talk about the girl. You seem to be going out of your way to make her seem attractive, to make me feel protective."

"This is necessary in order to perpetuate the species."

"That could be done medically, artificially," Pike said. "No, it seems more important to you now that I accept her, begin to like her…"

"We wish our specimens to be happy in their new life."

"Assuming that's another lie, why would you want me attracted to her? So I'll feel love, a husband-wife relationship? That would be necessary only if you needed to build a family group, or even a whole human…"

"With the female now properly conditioned, we will continue with…"

"You mean properly punished!" Pike shouted. "I'm the one who's not cooperating. Why don't you punish me?"

"First an emotion of protectiveness, now one of sympathy. Excellent." The Magistrate turned and walked away down the corridor. Frustrated again, Pike turned to study the mysterious seam.

He found himself studying a tree instead. Around him, in full day, was richly planted park and forest land, with a city on the horizon. He recognized the place instantly.

Immediately to his right was tethered a pair of handsome saddle horses. To the left, Vina, in casual Earth garb, was laying out a picnic lunch on the grass.

Looking up at him, smiling, she said, "I left the thermos hooked to my saddle."

Pike went to the horses and patted them. "Tango! You old quarter-gaited devil, you! Hello, Mary Lou! No, sorry, no sugar this time…"

But patting his pockets automatically, he was astonished to find the usual two sugar cubes there. He fed them to the horses. The Talosians seemed to think of everything.

He unhooked the thermos, carried it to the picnic and sat down, eyeing Vina curiously. She seemed nervous.

"Is it good to be home?" she asked him.

"I've been aching to be back here. They read our minds very well."

"*Please!*" It was a cry of fear. Her face pleaded with him to keep silent.

"Home, everything else I want," he said. "*If* I cooperate. Is that it?"

"Have you forgotten my—headaches, darling? The doctor said when you talk strangely like this…"

Her voice trailed off, shaken. Pike was beginning to feel trapped again.

"Look, I'm sorry they punish you," he said. "But I can't let them hold that over our heads. They'll *own* us then."

She continued to lay out the lunch, trying to ignore him. "My, it turned out to be a beautiful day, didn't it?"

"Funny," he mused. "About twenty-four hours ago I was telling the ship's doctor how much I wanted—something not so far from what's being offered here. No responsibility, no frustrations or bruises… And now that I have it, I understand the doctor's answer.

You either *live* life, bruises and all, or you turn your back on it and start dying. The Talosians went the second way."

"I hope you're hungry," Vina said, with false brightness. "The white sandwiches are your mother's chicken-tuna recipe."

He tried one. She was right. "Doc would be happy about part of this, at least. Said I needed a rest."

"This is a lovely place to rest."

"I spent my boyhood here. Doesn't compare with the gardens around the big cities, but I liked it better." He nodded toward the distant skyline. "That's Mojave. I was born there."

Vina laughed. "Is that supposed to be news to your wife? See—you're home! You can even stay if you want. Wouldn't it be nice showing your children where you once played?"

"These—'headaches', " Pike said. "They'll be hereditary. Would you wish them on a child—or a whole group of children?"

"That's foolish."

"Is it? Look, first I'm made to protect you, then to feel sympathy for you—and now familiar surroundings, comfortable husband and wife feelings. They don't need all this just for passion. They're after respect, affection, mutual dependence—and something else…"

"They say in the old days all this was a desert. Blowing sand, cactus…"

"I can't help either of us if you won't give me a chance!" Pike said sharply. "You told me once that illusions have become like a narcotic to them. They've even forgotten how to repair the machines left by their ancestors. Is that why we're so important? To build a colony of slaves who can…"

"Stop it, stop it! Don't you care what they do to me?"

"There's no such thing as a perfect prison," Pike said. "There's always some way out. Back in my cage, it seemed for a couple of minutes our keeper couldn't read my thoughts. Do emotions like anger block off our thought from them?"

"Don't you think," Vina said angrily, "that I've already tried things like that?"

"There's *some* way to beat them. Answer me!"

Her anger turned to tears. "Yes, they can't read—through primitive emotions. But you can't keep it up long enough. I've tried!" She began to sob. "They—keep at you and—at you, year after year—probing, looking for a weakness, and tricking—and

punishing and—they've won. They own me. I know you hate me for it."

Her fear, desperation, loneliness, everything that she had undergone were welling up in misery, deep and genuine. He put an arm around her. "I don't hate you. I can guess what it was like."

"It's not enough! They want you to have feelings that would build a family, protect it, work for it. Don't you understand? They read my thoughts, my desires, my dreams of what would be a perfect man. That's why they picked you. *I can't help but love you.* And they expect you to feel the same way."

Pike was shaken despite himself. The story was all too horribly likely. "If they can read my mind, they know I'm attracted to you. From the first day in the survivor's encampment. You were like a wild little animal."

"Was that the reason? Because I was like a barbarian?"

"Perhaps," Pike said, amused.

"I'm beginning to see why none of this has really worked on you," Vina said, straightening. "You've *been* home. And fighting, like on Rigel, that's not new to you either. A person's strongest dreams are about things he *can't do.*"

"Maybe so. I'm no psychologist."

"Yes," she said, smiling, almost to herself. "A ship's captain, always having to be so formal, so decent and honest and proper—he must wonder what it would be like to forget all that."

The scene changed, with a burst of music and wild merriment. The transition caught him still seated. He was now on a pillowed floor at a low round table bearing a large bowl of fruit and goblets of wine. He seemed to be clad now in rich silk robes, almost like that of an Oriental potentate; near him sat a man whom he vaguely remembered as an Earth trader, similarly but less luxuriantly garbed, while on the other side was an officer in Starfleet uniform whom he did not recognize at all. All of them were being served by women whose garb and manner strongly suggested slavery, and whose skins were the same color as Spock's. The music was coming from a quartet seated near a fountain pool.

Again he recognized the place; it was the courtyard of the Potentate of Orion. The officer leaned forward.

"Say, Pike," he said. "You used to be Captain of the *Enterprise,* didn't you?"

"Matter of fact, he was," said the trader.

"Thought so. You stopped here now and then—to check things out, so to speak."

"And then," the trader added, "sent Earth a blistering report on 'the Orion traders taking shocking advantage of the natives.' "

Both men laughed. "Funny how they are on this planet," the officer said. "They actually like being taken advantage of."

"And not just in profits, either."

The officer looked around appraisingly. "Nice place you've got here, Mr Pike."

"It's a start," the trader said. Both laughed again. The officer patted the nearest slave girl on the rump.

"Do any of you have a green one?" he asked. "They're dangerous, I hear. Razor-sharp claws, and they attract a man like a sensation of irresistible hunger."

Up to now, the officer had simply repelled Pike, but that last phrase sounded familiar—and had been delivered with mysterious emphasis. The trader gave Pike a knowing look.

"Now and then," he said, "comes a man who tames one."

There was a change in the music; it became louder, took on a slow, throbbing rhythm. The slave girls turned hurriedly, as if suddenly anxious to escape. Looking toward the musicians, Pike saw another girl, nude, her skin green, and glistening as if it had been oiled, kneeling at the edge of the pool. Her fingertips were long, gleaming, razor-edged scimitars; her hair like the mane of a wild animal. She was staring straight at him.

One of the slaves was slow. The green girl sprang up with a sound like a spitting cat, barring her escape. A man Pike had not seen before leapt forward to intervene, raising a whip.

"Stop!" Pike shouted, breaking his paralysis. The green girl turned and looked at him again, and then he recognized her. It was Vina once more.

She came forward to the center of the rectangle and posed for a moment. Then the music seemed to reach her, the slow surging beat forcing movement out of her as a reed flute takes possession of a cobra. She threw her head back, shrieked startlingly, and began to dance.

"Where'd he find her?" said the officer's voice. Pike was unable to tear his eyes away from her.

"He'd stumbled into a dark corridor," the trader's voice said, "and then he saw flickering light ahead. Almost like secret dreams a

bored sea captain might have, wasn't it? There she was, holding a torch, glistening green…"

"Strange looks she keeps giving you, Pike."

"Almost as if she knows something about you."

Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that the Talosians were baiting him through these two men; but he could not stop watching the dance.

"Wouldn't you say that's worth a man's soul?" said the trader.

"It makes you believe she could be anything," said the officer. "Suppose you had all of space to choose from, and this was only one small sample…"

That was too much. Pike rose, growling. "Get out of my way, blast you!"

He crossed the courtyard to a curtained doorway which he seemed to recall was an exit. Brushing the curtains aside, he found himself in a corridor. It was certainly dark, and grew darker as he strode angrily along it. In the distance was a flickering light, and then, there indeed was Vina, holding aloft a torch…

The scene lightened and the torch vanished. Vina, her skin white, her body covered with the Talosian garment, continued to hold her empty hand aloft for a second. They were back in the cage.

Vina's face contorted in fury. She ran to the transparency and pounded on it, shouting out into the corridor.

"No! Let us finish! I could have…"

"What's going on here?" another woman's voice' demanded. Both Pike and Vina whirled.

There were two other women in the cage: Number One, and Yeoman Colt. After so many shocks, Pike could summon no further reaction to this one.

"I might well ask you the same thing," he said numbly.

"We tried to Transport down in here," Number One said. "There was a risk we'd materialize in solid rock, but we'd already tried blasting open the top of the lift, with no luck."

"But there were six of us to start with," Yeoman Colt said. "I don't know why the others didn't make it."

"It's not fair!" Vina said to Pike. "You don't need them."

"They may be just what I need," Pike said drily, beginning to recover some of his wits. "Number One, Yeoman, hand me those phasers."

They passed the weapons over. He examined them. What he found did not particularly surprise him. "Empty."

"They were fully charged when we left," Number One said.

"No doubt. But you'll find your communicators don't work either." A thought struck him. He looked quickly toward the almost circular panel he had found before. Then, suddenly, he hurled both phasers at it.

"What good does that do?" Number One said coolly.

"Don't talk to me. Don't say anything. I'm working up a hate—filling my mind with a picture of beating their huge, misshapen heads to a pulp. Thoughts so primitive they shut everything else out. I hate them—do you understand?"

"How long can you block your thoughts?" Vina said. "A few minutes, an hour? How can that help you?"

Pike concentrated, trying to pay no attention to her. She turned on the two other women.

"He doesn't need you," she said, with jealous anger she did not have to force-feed. "He's already picked me."

"Picked you for what?" Colt asked.

Vina looked at her scornfully. "Now there's a great chance for intelligent offspring."

" 'Offspring?' " Colt echoed. "As in 'children' "?

"As in he's 'Adam,' " Number One said, indicating Pike. "Isn't that it?"

"You're no better choice. They'd have better luck crossing him with a computer!"

"Shall I compute your age?" Number One said. "You were listed on that expedition as an adult crewman. Now, adding eighteen years to that…"

She broke off as Vina turned to the transparency. The Magistrate was back. The two crewwomen stared at him with interest.

"It's not fair," Vina said. "I did everything you asked."

The Magistrate ignored her. "Since you resist the present specimen," he said to Pike, "you now have a selection."

Pike threw himself at the impervious figure. "I'll break out, get to you somehow!" he shouted. "Is your blood red like ours? I'm going to find out!"

"Each of the two new specimens has qualities in her favor. The female you call 'Number One' has the superior mind and would produce highly intelligent offspring. Although she seems to lack

emotion, this is largely a pretense. She often has fantasies involving you."

Number One looked flustered for the first time in Pike's memory, but he turned this, too, into rage at the invasion of her privacy. "All I want is to get my hands on you! Can you read these thoughts? Images of hate, killing…"

"The other new arrival has considered you unreachable, but is now realizing that this has changed. The factors in her favor are youth and strength, plus an unusually strong female emotion which…"

"You'll find my thoughts more interesting! Primitive thoughts you can't understand; emotions so ugly you can't…"

The pain hit him then and he went down, writhing. The images involved this time were from the torture chambers of the Inquisition. Over them, dimly, floated the Magistrate's thought, as though directed at someone else.

"Wrong thinking is punishable; right thinking will be as quickly rewarded. You will find it an effective combination."

The illusion vanished and Pike rolled weakly to a sitting position. He found the Magistrate gone, and the two crewwomen bending over him.

"No—don't—help me. Just leave me alone. Got to concentrate on hate. They can't read through it."

The hours wore on and eventually the lights went down. It seemed obvious that the Talosians intended to keep all three women penned with him. Trying to keep the hate alive became increasingly more difficult; he slammed his fist against the enclosure wall again and again, hoping the pain would help.

The women conversed in low tones for a while, and then, one by one, fell asleep, Vina on the bed, the other two on the floor leaning against it. Pike squatted against the wall nearby, no thoughts in his mind now but roaring fatigue and the effort to fight it.

Then he sensed, rather than heard movement at his side. The wall panel had opened, and a Talosian arm was reaching in for the discarded phasers. He exploded into action, grabbing the arm and heaving.

The Magistrate was almost catapulted into the room by the force of that yank. Instantly, Pike's hands were around his throat.

"Don't hurt him!" Vina cried from the bed. "They don't mean to be evil…"

"I've had some samples of how 'good' they are…"

The Talosian vanished and Pike found himself holding the neck of the snarling anthropoid-spider creature he had first seen in a cell across from his. Its fangs snapped at his face. Colt shrieked.

Pike grimly tightened his grip. "I'm still holding your neck! Stop this illusion or I'll snap it!" The spider-thing changed back into the Magistrate again. "That's better. Try one more illusion—try anything at all—I'll take one quick twist. Understand?"

He loosened his hands slightly, allowing the Magistrate to gasp for breath. The forehead vein throbbed. "Your ship. Release me or we destroy it."

"He's not bluffing," Vina said. "With illusions they can make your crew work the wrong controls, push any button it takes to destroy the ship."

"I'll gamble he's too intelligent to kill for no reason at all. On the other hand, *I've* got a reason. Number One, take a good grip on his throat for me. And at the slightest excuse…"

"I understand, Captain," Number One said grimly.

Freed, Pike picked up the phasers. Putting one into his belt, he adjusted the other, leveled it at the transparency, and pulled the trigger. As he expected, it didn't fire. He turned back to the Magistrate and pressed the weapon against his head.

"I'm betting," he said almost conversationally, "that you've created an illusion that this phaser is empty. That you don't know enough about your own machines, let alone ours, to dare to tamper with them. And that this one just blasted a hole in that wall which you're keeping us from seeing. Shall I test my theory on your head?"

The Magistrate closed his eyes resignedly. At once, there was a huge, jagged hole in the front of the cage.

"Q.E.D. Number One, you can let go of him now. If he acts up, I can shoot him, and he knows it. Everybody out. We're leaving!"

On the surface, only the top of the lift shaft still stood; the top of the knoll had been blasted clean off. So the Talosians had prevented the rescue party from seeing that, too.

Number One tried her communicator, but without effect. Noting the Magistrate's forehead vein throbbing again, Pike raised his phaser and said in a voice of iron, "I want contact with my ship. *Right now.*"

"No," said the Magistrate. "You are now on the surface where we intended you to be in the end. With the female of your choice, you will soon begin carefully guided lives…"

"Beginning with burying you."

"I see you intend to kill. I shall not prevent you; others of us will replace me. To help you reclaim the planet, our zoological gardens will furnish a variety of plant life…"

"Look," Pike said, "I'll make a deal with you. You and your life for the lives of these two Earthwomen."

"Since our life span is many times yours, we have time to evolve a society trained as artisans, technicans…"

"Do you understand what I'm saying? Give me proof our ship is all right, send these two back to it, and I'll stay here with Vina."

He felt a tug at his belt, and out of the corner of his eye saw that Number One had pulled the spare phaser out of it. The rachet popped like firecrackers as she turned the gain control full around. The phaser began to hum, rising in both pitch and volume. The weapon was building up an overload—a force chamber explosion.

"It's wrong," Number One said, "to create a whole race of humans to live as slaves. Do you concur, Captain?"

After a moment of hesitation, Pike nodded.

"Is this a deception?" asked the Magistrate. "Do you really intend to destroy yourselves? Yes, I see that you do."

"Vina, you've got time to get back underground. But hurry. And Talosian, to show just how primitive humans are, you can go with her."

The Magistrate did not move, nor did Vina.

"No," she said. "If you all think it's this important, then I can't leave either. I suppose if they still have one human, they might try again."

"We had not believed this possible," the Magistrate said, his thoughts betraying what might have been a strange sadness. "The customs and history of your race show a unique hatred of captivity, even when pleasant and benevolent. But you prefer death. This makes you too violent and dangerous a species for our needs."

"He means," Vina said, "they can't use you. You're free to go back to your ship."

Number One turned the phaser off, and just in time, too. In the renewed silence, Pike said, "Vina, that's it. No apologies. You captured one of us, threatened us, tortured us…"

"Your unsuitability has condemned the Talosian race to eventual death," the Magistrate said. "Is this not sufficient? No other specimens have shown your adaptability. You were our last hope."

"Nonsense," Pike said, surprised. "Surely some form of trade, some mutual cooperation…"

The Magistrate shook his head. "Your race would learn our power of illusion—and destroy itself. It is important to *our* beliefs to prevent this."

"Captain," Number One said, "we have Transporter control now."

"Good. Let's go. Vina, you too."

"I—" Vina said. "I can't go with you."

Pike felt a flash of what might almost have been exasperation. "Number One, Yeoman Colt, go aloft. I'll be with you when I've gotten to the bottom of this." As they hesitated, he added, "Orders."

They shimmered and vanished. Pike swung on Vina. "Now…"

He stopped, astounded and horrified. Vina was changing. Her face was wrinkling. An ugly scar appeared. Her body was becoming cruelly deformed. Throughout, she looked back at Pike with bitter eyes. The change did not stop until she was old, shockingly twisted, downright ugly.

"This is the female's true appearance," the Magistrate said.

It couldn't be true. *This* was the youngster of the survivors' camp, the sturdy peasant, the wife on Earth, the green Orionese savage who had danced so…

"This is the truth," Vina said, in an old woman's voice. She lifted her arms. "See me as I am. They found me in the wreckage, dying, nothing but a lump of flesh. They fixed me fine. Everything works. But—*they had no guide for putting me back together.*

"Do you understand now? Do you see why I can't go with you?"

She turned and stumbled toward the lift. Pike watched her go with horror and pity. Then he turned to the Magistrate, who said; "It was necessary to convince you that her desire to stay is an honest one."

Pike looked at him with new eyes. "You have some sparks of decency in you after all. Will you give her back her illusion of beauty?"

"We will. And more. See."

At the shaft, the image of the lovely Vina was entering the lift—*accompanied by himself.* The two turned and waved. Then the lift carried them down into the bowels of Talos IV.

"She has her illusion," the Magistrate said. Was he almost smiling? "And you have reality. May you find your way as pleasant."

Spock, Number One, Jose, Colt and Boyce all crowded toward him as he stepped out of the Transporter Chamber.

"What happened to Vina?" Colt demanded.

"Isn't she—coming with us?" asked Number One.

"No," Pike said shortly. "And I agree with her reasons. Now break it up here. What is this we're running, a cadet ship? Everybody on the bridge! Navigator, I want a course!"

"Yessir!"

They scattered like flushed partridges—all except Boyce, who said, "Hold on a minute, Captain."

"What for? I feel fine."

"That's the trouble. You look a hundred per cent better."

"I am. Didn't you recommend rest and change? I've had both. I've even been—home. Now, let's get on with things."

As the *Enterprise* moved away from Talos IV, routine re-established itself quickly, and the memory of all those illusions began to fade. They had not, after all, been real experiences—most of them. But Pike could not resist stealing a quick look from Number One to Colt, wondering which of them, in other circumstances, he might have picked.

When he found them both looking at him as if with the same speculation, he turned his eyes determinedly to the viewscreen and banished the thought.

He had had plenty of practice at that, lately.

Afterword

As the reader will now see, this story constituted the original pilot film for *Star Trek*, and was shown as such at the 24th World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, September 1—5, 1966. Between the selling of the series and the actual television broadcast of *The Menagerie*, the whole concept of the cast changed radically. Number One was moved one step down in the chain of command, becoming Uhura, while her ostensible lack of emotion and computer-like mind were transferred to Spock; Yeoman Colt became Yeoman Rand; Boyce became McCoy; Tyler became Sulu. The net effect was to make the new officers more interracial than before. The notion that the highly trained crew would ever be risked in ordinary hand-to-hand infantry combat was dropped.

Most important, perhaps, was that in the pilot film Pike had wound up with a potentially explosive situation with two of his crewwomen, which would be too complex to maintain through a long-term series of episodes. He had to be replaced, and the whole story turned into relatively ancient history; and thus was born Captain Kirk, and the framing story I have left out. All these stages are visible in the scripts I had to work from, which are heavily revised in various handwritings (and in which Pike confusingly appears from time to time as 'Captain Spring' and 'Captain Winter').

The only alternative would have been to reshoot the original *Menagerie* with the new cast, which would have been not only expensive, but would have produced all kinds of unwanted complexities in succeeding stories. Mr Roddenberry obviously decided to let it stand as something that had happened way-back-when, and frame it as such. I think this was wise and I have followed his lead in this adaptation.

Ordinarily, writers should not inflict their technical problems on readers, who have every right to demand that such problems be solved before the story is published. But I sometimes get letters from *Star Trek* fans who castigate me for changing even one or two words in scripts they have memorized, or even have on tape. In this case, as in that of *The City on the Edge of Forever* (STAR TREK TWO), there were conflicts that couldn't be resolved by

slavishly following the final text and ignoring how it had evolved. In both cases, I had to make my own judgment of what would best serve the authors' intents.

—J. B.

SHORE LEAVE*

(Theodore Sturgeon) *Novelised by Judith A. Lawrence

Captain James Kirk slumped in his chair and contemplated his viewscreen. At least this planet was not emitting torpedoes or mysterious signals, for once. He sincerely hoped it wouldn't start anything; he wasn't at all sure he could deal with another problem. Even his mind felt sluggish.

He became vaguely aware of footsteps nearing him; he couldn't allow himself to slouch like this. He straightened up with effort and felt a stab of pain in his back.

"Anything from the landing party yet, Mr Spock?"

"They should be sending up a report momentarily, Captain." Spock glanced at him. "Is something wrong?"

"Kink in my back. Yes, just about there."

A strong hand touched, assessed and began to knead the spastic muscle. He could always rely on Spock.

"Just a little higher. Ohh—yes. Just there, Spock. Harder—push hard…" But Spock was standing in front of him.

"What—?" Her hands skillfully working, Yeoman Tonia Barrows smiled as he turned his head. He couldn't start using the female crew as personal masseuses. Damn. "Thank you, Yeoman," he said hastily. "That's sufficient." It had helped.

"You need sleep, Captain," said the girl hesitantly. "If it's not out of line to suggest—"

"I've had enough of that from Dr McCoy. Thank you."

Spock folded his arms. "And Dr McCoy is completely correct, Captain. After what this crew has been through in the last few months, there's not a man aboard who doesn't need a rest."

"Myself excepted, of course."

Sometimes, Spock was almost insufferable. But Kirk didn't really have to remain on the bridge just now; he could be doing the ship's log from his be—… quarters, while he waited for the landing party to report.

He fumbled the switch to "Record": "Captain's Log, Star Date Three-Oh-Two-Five point uh… three," he said wearily. "We are orbiting an inun—unan—uninhabited planet in the Omicron Delta Region. A planet remarkably like Earth—or how we remember Earth. Preliminary—preliminary reports make it sound too good to be true: flowers and trees, very restful." He yawned. "Pending the report from the scouts, I plan to authorize a snore—shore leave "

Downstairs, the landing party was gratefully inhaling fresh air scented with herbs and flowers. Tall trees rustled gently in a light breeze. The sky was cornflower blue. How long since anyone aboard the *Enterprise* had had a chance to even notice weather, undistracted? McCoy wondered.

There were no buildings; just the trees. No beings but themselves and the daisies; and the quiet. They never noticed the constant sounds of the ship's systems until they were not there.

"It's beautiful," said Sulu, gazing at the forests and green meadows. "No animals, no people, no worries… just what the doctor ordered, right, Doctor?"

"I couldn't have prescribed better," said McCoy happily. "We are one weary ship."

"Do you think the Captain will give us shore leave here?"

"Depends on my report, and those of the other scouts," said McCoy. "Oh!" He stopped short.

Sulu followed his look. Ahead of them, a small lake lay like a jewel in a setting of emerald leaves. Flowering shrubs covered the banks, and a willow wept gracefully into the water.

"You have to see this place to believe it," said McCoy with great delight. "It's like something out of… *Alice in Wonderland!* The Captain has to come down here!"

Sulu nodded in total agreement. "He'd like it."

"He *needs* it. You have your problems, and I have mine. He has his, plus ours plus those of four hundred and thirty other people." McCoy drifted toward the water, soaking up sun and warm air. Rapt in his wonderland, he barely remembered to look back at Sulu. "What are you doing?"

Sulu was crouched over a plant, adjusting his tricorder. "Getting cell structure records—a blade of grass, a bush, a flower petal; with these, we can analyze the whole planet's biology."

McCoy left him to it. He wasn't feeling at all analytical. He wandered down a faint path, absorbing peace, and wondering.

"Oh! My paws and whiskers! I shall be late!"

McCoy came to with a bang. Aural hallucinations, he diagnosed. He himself must be more tired than he had thought. Paws and whiskers, indeed. He turned very slowly.

There it was. Running on twinkling hind feet. About four feet tall with white fur and long ears, pulling an old-fashioned turnip watch from its waist-coat pocket.

"Tch!" The white rabbit disappeared through a gap in the dense shrubbery.

McCoy shook his head. I didn't see that. I am quite, quite sure that I didn't see that, he told himself. The bushes behind him rustled.

"Excuse me, sir," said the little girl in the pinafore, politely. "Have you seen a rawther large white Rabbit with a yellow wais' c't and white gloves hereabouts?"

McCoy did not believe this either, of course. But in a stunned trance, he pointed after the rabbit.

The little girl curtseyed and said, "Thank you veddy much," and disappeared after the rabbit.

McCoy closed his eyes tight. "Sulu! SULU!"

He wasn't going to look anymore. Let Sulu see things. He, McCoy, was not obliged to believe any impossible things *after* breakfast.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

"Did—did you see them?"

"See what? I don't see anything," said Sulu, looking around. "What is it, Doctor?"

McCoy gulped. "I—uh—" There was nothing to say. He followed Sulu helplessly.

"Captain?"

Somebody at the door. Wake up. Alert. Responsible. Blood, start circulating. You can do better than this. "Yes?"

"Spock, Captain. I have the doctor's report on the crew."

"Come in, Spock." Kirk dragged himself together and stood.

"All systems are now on automatic, Captain, and skeleton standby crew is ready to relieve the bridge, Communications and

Engineering." Spock was very businesslike.

"We'll beam the starboard section down first, Mr Spock. Which party would you like to go down with?"

"Unnecessary in my case, Captain. On my planet, to rest is to rest, to cease using energy. To me, it is illogical to run up and down on green grass, using energy instead of saving it."

Insufferable.

The desk communicator sounded. "Kirk here."

"Dr McCoy is calling from the planet, sir."

"Good. Open a channel, Lieutenant Uhura."

"Captain," said McCoy. "Are you beaming down?"

"I hadn't planned to, Bones. Why?"

"Well," said McCoy, "either our scouting probes and detectors are malfunctioning, and all of us scouts getting careless and beauty-intoxicated, or I have to report myself unfit for duty."

"Explain." Kirk quelled a wave of depression. A Problem. Either malfunctioning equipment or a malfunctioning staff. Great.

"On this supposedly uninhabited planet," McCoy stated with great precision, "I just saw a large white rabbit pull a gold watch out of his vest pocket. Then he claimed he was late."

Kirk burst out with relieved laughter. Not a Problem after all. "That's very good, Bones. Now I have one for you. The rabbit was followed by a little blonde girl, right?"

"Er…" said McCoy. "As a matter of fact, she was… and they disappeared through a hole in the hedge!"

Still chuckling, Kirk said, "I'll take your report under consideration, Doctor. Captain out." He turned to the baffled Spock. "That was a McCoy-pill, with a little mystery sugarcoating. He's trying to get me down there. But I won't swallow it."

"Very well, Captain," said Spock. "There was something I came to discuss." Kirk looked at him. "I picked this up from Dr McCoy's log."

At last Kirk observed that Spock was holding a paper.

" 'We have a crew member who shows signs of stress and fatigue. Reaction time down nine to twelve percent. Associational rating norm minus three.' "

Concern penetrated the fog of Kirk's exhaustion. "That's much too low a rating," he said sharply.

" 'He is becoming irritable, inefficient, and quarrelsome. And yet he refuses to take rest and rehabilitation.' " Spock looked up. "He

has the right, of course, but—"

"A crewman's rights end where the safety of the ship begins. That man will go ashore on my orders," said Kirk with annoyance. "What's his name?"

"James Kirk."

His head jerked up. That's what comes of giving orders before you have all the details. Inefficient. And they'd caught him fair and square.

Spock handed him the paper. "Enjoy yourself, Captain, it's an interesting planet. I believe you'll find it quite pleasant, very much like your Earth. The scouts have detected no life forms, artifacts or force fields of any kind; nothing but peace and sunlight and good air. You'll have no problems."

Kirk shrugged and finally smiled. "You win, Spock. I'll go."

Yeoman Barrows accompanied him down, and they materialized near two of the scouts.

"Rodriguez, Teller," Kirk acknowledged. "Everything all right?"

"Yes, sir," replied the dark boy, who was packing up a box of samples. "We've completed the specimen survey." The ensign with him was looking just a little wistful. Perhaps she was too tired to work.

"Sufficient, Mr Rodriguez. Beam your reports up to Mr Spock, and start enjoying yourselves."

The girl brightened. "Yes, sir!" said Rodriguez, handing her the tricorder. "Oh, sir, I think you'll find Dr McCoy just over there."

Kirk looked "there," and all around him. "Restful here, isn't it? After what we've gone through, it's hard to believe a planet this beautiful exists."

"It is beautiful." The yeoman in the brief skirt twirled around. "So lovely and peaceful and—" she caught herself on the edge of burbling. "Oh, I mean—affirmative, Captain."

Kirk allowed himself a small smile at her youthful bounce, and he started toward McCoy with Yeoman Barrows. "McCoy? Where are you?"

The foliage was thick in this glade. "Over here!"

McCoy was still standing where he had seen what he had seen.

"Bones! Know any good rabbit jokes lately?" The doctor was not going to live that down for some time.

"Matter of fact, I do," said McCoy. His expression was too serious for comfort. "But this is not one of them. Look at this."

Kirk's smile faded as he followed McCoy's pointing finger. Tracks. On a planet without animals. Big tracks, in pairs. A hopping creature.

"I saw what I saw, Jim. Maybe I hallucinated it. But take a look here and tell me what you think."

"Aren't those prints kind of big for a rabbit?"

"Er—" McCoy looked a little sheepish. "As I reported, Captain, this was a most unusual rabbit."

Kirk dropped to his knees to study the footprints. "I admit I thought it was a joke. But these tracks are very real." The prints were far apart. It must have had long legs. A large hopping creature. "What about Sulu? Will he confirm what you saw?"

McCoy shook his head. "He was examining the flora at the time."

"I don't like this, Bones." Kirk flipped open his communicator. "Bridge. This is the Captain. Has the first shore party beamed down yet?"

"Negative, Captain. They're just about to start."

"Give them this message. Stand by. No one is to leave the ship until you hear further from me."

There was a brief delay before Uhura's voice came back with a dejected, "Aye, aye, sir."

McCoy protested. "Are you canceling the shore leave, Jim?"

"Until we find an explanation of this." He pointed at the enigmatic tracks.

"But the crew, they badly need rest."

"I know." said Kirk, feeling the weight of responsibility very heavily indeed. "But what you saw looked harmless. It probably is harmless, but before I bring my people down, I want proof that it is harmless."

McCoy was about to object that the worst that could happen would be an encounter with a pack of cards, when he was interrupted.

Shots. Gunshots.

So much for peace and tranquility; Kirk drew his phaser and started running. He stopped short as he found Sulu standing in a clearing, grinning happily and aiming at an innocent leaf.

Bang!

McCoy caught up with Kirk as he was saying wearily, “Mr Sulu, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Target shooting, Captain,” said Sulu. “Isn’t it a beauty? I don’t have anything like this in my collection!”

“Where did you get it?”

“I *found* it. I know it’s a crazy coincidence, but I’ve always wanted one. I found it lying right back there.” He held it out proudly for Kirk’s inspection. “An old-time Police Special, and in beautiful condition. Hasn’t been a gun like this made in, oh, a couple of centuries. Look, it fires lead pellets propelled by expanding gases from a chemical explosion.”

Sulu and his hobbies. “I’ve seen them before,” said Kirk, remembering certain adventures when he had tangled with Earth’s past history. He took the weapon and smiled at Sulu. One couldn’t blame him, but—"I’ll hang on to it. This fresh air seems to have made you a little trigger-happy.”

Sulu looked disappointed but said only, “Yes, sir.”

Yeoman Tonia Barrows was not interested in guns. As soon as she had seen that they were not confronted with an emergency, she had begun to wander. Now she called. “Sir! Dr McCoy’s rabbit. He must have come through here.”

She pointed at a set of tracks, identical to the first, that crossed the clearing into the wood beyond.

Kirk examined the tracks. “Bones, are you certain your instruments showed no animal life on this planet?”

“Absolutely. No mammals, birds, insects, nothing.

I’m certain our readings weren’t off, and yet…” He stared down at the perplexing prints.

Kirk sighed. “I’d like to believe this is an elaborate gag. But—” He stood up and looked toward the wood. “Yeoman Barrows, you accompany Mr Sulu. Find out where those tracks come from.” The pair turned to the shrubbery. “You come with me back to the glade, Doctor. I want another look at that area.”

As they began walking back to the aquamarine lake, Kirk said with some bitterness, “This is becoming one very unusual shore leave.”

McCoy said lightly, “It could be worse.”

“How?”

“You could have seen that rabbit.”

Kirk laughed in spite of his worry. “What’s the matter, Bones? Getting a persecution complex?”

"I'm; starting to feel a little bit picked on, if that's what you mean," said McCoy ruefully.

"I know that feeling well. I had it at the Academy." They strolled on. McCoy noted with satisfaction that Kirk seemed a little less tense. "An upperclassman there—one practical joke after another, and always on me. My own personal devil, a guy by the name of Finnegan."

"And you, being a serious young cadet—?"

"Serious? Bones, I'll make a confession. I was absolutely *grim*. Which delighted Finnegan. He was the one to put a bowl of cold soup in your bed, a bucket of water propped on a half-open door. You never knew where he'd strike next."

McCoy thought, "And you're still sore about it, long past as it is."

"More tracks, Bones. Looks like your rabbit came from over there." McCoy stooped and looked at the ground. "A girl's footprints too, Jim. The blonde girl I saw chasing it."

"Bones, you follow the rabbit. I'll backtrack the girl. We'll meet on the other side of that hill." McCoy nodded. Kirk started walking along the line of small boot-prints. Little girls, rabbits, old-fashioned guns—whatever next?

He hadn't thought about that lout Finnegan in years. What a thorn in his flesh that man had been! He remembered the day…

Tall, broad-shouldered, with a challenging grin pasted on his map, a figure was waiting by the tree in front of him. Kirk blinked. "*Finnegan!*"

The youth, dressed in Academy cadet uniform, swaggered up to him with a wicked laugh.

"Never know when I'm going to strike, eh, Jimmy boy?" The same faint brogue, the same cackling derision. As Kirk stood there, incredulous, he was jarred into accepting this reality by a sudden right to the jaw which knocked him flat. He got up slowly, staring at his old enemy who danced in a fighter's crouch, baiting him. "All right, Jimmy boy, go ahead. Lay one on me! Go ahead; that's what you've always wanted, isn't it?" It was. Kirk let go his disbelief and crouched. He was not going to pass up this chance to deal with this old batenoire at last. Red rage surged in him as he remembered all the bullying, the merciless persecution.

"Come on, come on!" sneered Finnegan. Kirk started at him.

"Let's do that one again!"

A woman screamed. Oh, hell. And he pulled his punch. Yeoman Barrows? He was the Captain. His yeoman was in danger. Hell. He

ran toward the sound of the scream, with Finnegan calling after him, "Any excuse, Jim baby? Right? Run away, that's right!"

McCoy appeared from the underbrush, running.

"What was that?"

"Barrows. Come on."

They found the girl huddled against a tree. Her tunic was torn and her hair disheveled. She was alone and weeping hysterically.

"What happened?"

"I—I—I don't know. I mean—I do know," she sobbed. "I guess… I was following those tracks and… ohhh! There he was!"

"There who was?" snapped Kirk. This was no way for a trained crewman to give information.

"Him!" wailed the yeoman.

"Barrows, give me a report!"

She began to gain control of herself. "He had a cloak, sir. And—and a dagger with jewels on the handle."

McCoy was examining her. "Yeoman Barrows, are you sure you didn't imagine this?"

She pulled up the torn shoulder of her dress, suddenly embarrassed. "Captain, I know it sounds incredible." The men nodded. "But I didn't imagine it any more than I imagined he did this." She gestured with the ripped tunic.

"All right," said McCoy reassuringly. "We believe you. But who was your Don Juan, anyway?"

"How did you know?" she gasped.

"Know what?"

"It was so, you know, sort of—storybook, walking around this place." She sniffed, and went on rather shyly. "I was thinking, all a girl needs here is Don Juan. Just daydreaming. You know?" She looked at the officers hesitantly. "Like you might think of some girl you'd like to meet."

Kirk was not prepared to dwell on this. He looked around, missing something.

"Mr Sulu was with you. Where is he?"

"Oh. He ran after… him. He—" But Sulu was nowhere in sight.

"Stay with her, Doctor." Kirk took off at a run.

"Mr Sulu!" he called. "Sulu! Where are you?" There was no reply. He brushed through the undergrowth and into a clearing; here was a miniature desert-garden, with cactus flowers blooming. Still calling, he began searching among the rocks.

There were footsteps on his right. "Sulu?"

It was not Sulu. The young girl smiled, real roses on her dress stirring in the breeze. She came toward Kirk with memory in her eyes.

"Ruth." The memory kindled in the Captain. "You! How—I don't understand—"

"Jim, darling. It is me. It's Ruth." He had clamped that particular wound closed, forever. Somehow in the pressure of final examinations and qualifications and his first cruise, he had lost her, and put away the regrets.

"You don't think I'm real." He had even forgotten the gentleness of her voice. It all came flooding back with pain and longing. "But I am, darling, I am."

James Kirk's Ruth could not possibly exist here and now. But as she put her soft arms around his neck, he did not doubt her reality. He could not help but return her embrace.

He tried to resist; he took out his communicator. "Dr McCoy, come in." But his eyes were fixed on Ruth. "McCoy, do you read me?"

She put the communicator to one side. "Think of nothing at all, darling, except our being together again." Her soft hair brushed his face.

"Ruth. How can it be you? You can't be here!"

She snuggled closer and looked up at him, her skin glowing in the sun. "It doesn't matter. Does it?"

Fifteen years ago. She still looked exactly the same, the fresh, young, gentle creature who had wept so bitterly at their last goodbye. She said again, "It doesn't matter. None of that matters, Jimmy."

His communicator beeped, cutting through his daze.

"Kirk here."

McCoy wanted to know if he had found Sulu.

"What?" She still wore her hair in a coronet of braids.

"Did you find Mr Sulu?"

"Oh—no," said Kirk absently. "But I'm sure he's all right." She was dreaming into his eyes. "I mean, why shouldn't he be?"

"Captain, are *you* all right?"

"Oh, yes, I'm fine." The communicator seemed to float away by itself to the rock beside him. It beeped again.

He sighed, and acknowledged. "Yes, Mr Rodriguez."

"Captain, a while ago, I saw… well, birds. Whole flocks of them."

"Don't you like birds, Mr Rodriguez?" She was holding his hand in their special clasp.

"I like them fine, sir. But all our surveys showed—"

Kirk hadn't noticed the bird song that was coming from the forest. It had seemed to belong there.

"Offhand, Mr Rodriguez, I'd say our instruments must be defective." It didn't really seem to matter. "There are indeed life forms on this planet." She nestled against his shoulder.

Rodriguez was being stubborn. "Sir, our survey couldn't have been that wrong."

Ruth moved a little away from him and regarded him with longing.

"Rodriguez, have all search parties rendezvous at the glade. I want some answers to all this."

"Aye, aye, sir." He couldn't let it happen again, lose her again. Nor could he abandon his crew to whatever dangers this mysterious planet held. Yearning and duty fought in his belly.

Ruth held out her hand to him and gave him a radiant smile. "You have to go."

"I don't want to." How he didn't want to!

This time, she did not weep. She bent toward him and said gently, "You'll see me again—if you want to." She kissed his cheek and backed away from him. He started after her.

"But I have to ask you—You haven't told me—"

"Do what you have to do. Then I'll be waiting, Jim." Would she? This time? He called her as she vanished into the wood. The communicator beeped again.

"Captain Kirk here." His eyes were still fixed on the gap between the trees where she had disappeared.

Mr Spock said, "Captain, I am getting strange readings from the planet's surface. There seems to be a power field of some kind down there now."

"Specify."

"A highly sophisticated type of energy, Captain, which seems to have begun operating since we took our original readings. It is draining our power aboard ship and increasingly affecting communications."

"Can you pinpoint the source?" Kirk's attention was now reluctantly engaged.

"It could be beneath the planet's surface, but I cannot locate it precisely. Its patterns would indicate some sort of industrial activity."

Industrial activity? Here among the woods and fields?"Keep me posted, Mr Spock. We'll continue our investigations from down here."

Investigations were proceeding slowly. Dr McCoy sat with Yeoman Barrows under the birch tree. She was still clutching her torn tunic to her shoulder.

"Feeling better?"

She smiled. "A little. But I wouldn't want to be alone here."

"Why not?" McCoy gave a long, contented sigh. "It's a beautiful place. A little strange, I admit, but—"

"That's just it. It's almost too beautiful. I was thinking, before my tunic was even… torn, in a place like this, a girl should be dressed to match." Yeoman Barrows was showing an unsuspected streak of romanticism. "Let's see now… like a fairy-tale princess, with lots of floaty stuff and a tall pointed hat with a veil."

McCoy looked down at her kindly. Then he looked again. She was really a lovely young woman. Funny he had never noticed before. Of course, she had been a patient.

She was really *very* pretty.

"I see what you mean. But then you'd have whole armies of Don Juans to fight off." She chuckled. "And me too."

She glanced up from lowered eyelids. "Is that a promise, Doctor?"

They began walking around the lake. The twittering of birds rilled the air, and the greenness of leaves burnished with sunlight filled their eyes.

"Oh!" On a bush, a heap of fabric was carelessly flung. White silks fluttered. "Oh, Doctor, they're lovely!" Yeoman Barrows picked up a stream of veiling.

"Yes, they are," agreed McCoy, looking at Yeoman Barrows's bright eyes.

She covered her face and peered at him over the veil. "Look at me!" She pirouetted lightly, and then promenaded, and spoke with mock seriousness. "A lady to be protected and fought for, a princess of the blood royal!"

What had taken him so long?"You are all of those things, and many more." He must have forgotten how to play, with all the heavy preoccupations of his work. Bless her, she had not. She was gay and vulnerable and lovely.

He took the costume from the shrub and pushed it into her arms. "They'd look even lovelier with you wearing them."

Her impish look changed suddenly to terror as she looked back at the bush. "Doctor, I'm afraid."

"Easy now," he said comfortingly as she buried her face in his shoulder. He could feel her trembling. He tried not to notice that her tunic had fallen from her shoulder. He felt a momentary stab of jealousy of that tedious "Don Juan" who had seen her first. "Look, I don't know what, or where or how, but the dress is here." He smiled down at her. "I'd like to see you in it."

She looked at the clothes doubtfully as she disengaged herself. She held the dress up in front of her; in spite of her qualms, she was obviously tempted. He nodded encouragement. She said, "All —all right!" and stepped around the bush. "But you stay right there—and don't peek!"

"My dear girl, I'm a doctor," said McCoy with dignity. "When I peek, it's in the line of duty."

Leonard McCoy, gentleman medic, found himself unable to avoid noticing the flinging of a tunic and the tantalizing motions that showed over the top of the shrubbery. His communicator sounded.

"Calling Dr McCoy, come in please, Calling—"

He raised the instrument to his ear. "McCoy here." What a time for a call. And the voice was very faint. "I can't read you very well. Is that Rodriguez?"

"This is all the volume I get on this thing. Can't read you very well either. Captain's orders. Rendezvous at the glade where he first found you."

"Right. Rodriguez? What the devil's wrong with the communicators? Esteban? Esteban!"

McCoy shook the instrument as if it were an old-time thermometer, and then shook his head and shrugged. As he turned back for a last peek, he gasped.

Yeoman Barrows was gone. In her place stood a medieval vision, clad in a tall pointed hat and a pale green dress that clung to her body and spread in graceful folds below her hips. Her face was aglow, and she wore her veil like a bride.

Why the hell hadn't he noticed?

The Captain was consulting his Science Officer. He could barely hear.

"I want an explanation, Spock. First, there's Alice in Wonderland when there was supposedly no animal life. Then Sulu's gun, where there were no refined metals. Then the birds, and my—the two people I saw."

"Is there any chance these could be hallucinations, Captain?"

"One 'hallucination' flattened me with a clout on the jaw. The other—"

"That sounds like painful reality, Captain."

"And then there are the tracks…"

"There has to be a logical explanation. Captain, your signal is very weak. Can you turn up the gain?"

"I'm already on maximum."

There was a pause. "Captain, shall I beam down an armed party?"

Kirk thought not. "Our people here are armed with phasers. Besides, there's yet to be any real danger. It's just… Captain out." He stood for a moment, watching the sudden flight of a flock of birds across the sky. He was still so very tired. If only this shore leave could *be* a shore leave instead of an enigma! Why were those birds in the air? Something must have startled them. Sulu! He was still unaccounted for. Kirk rubbed his eyes and started into the forest.

There was a faint scream, shouting and thuds. As he ran, Kirk called to McCoy. Sulu burst out of the wood at top speed.

"Take cover, Captain! There's a samurai after me!"

"A what?"

No one, nothing was following Sulu, who stopped and looked over his shoulder, panting. "A samurai. With a sword—you know, an ancient warrior. Captain, you've got to believe me!"

"I do," said Kirk. He couldn't doubt Sulu. "I've met some interesting personalities here myself. Have you seen the rest of the landing party?".

"Rodriguez called a few minutes ago. Just before I met the samurai. He said you were rendezvousing back at the glade."

They started moving toward the meeting point, Sulu glancing nervously behind him.

"I hope Rodriguez got through to everybody. Communications are almost out."

"That's not all," said Sulu. "I tried to take a shot at the samurai. My phaser's out." He shoved the useless weapon back into his belt.

Kirk was still holding his own, drawn as he had heard the sounds of Sulu's encounter. He pointed it at the ground and fired. Nothing happened. He checked the settings and fired again. Slowly he replaced it in his belt.

"We had better get to the glade," he said grimly.

"Yes, sir. We—Look!"

The air was shimmering. A familiar shimmer, but erratic and uncertain. "Someone's beaming down from the ship."

Someone was certainly trying to, but there appeared to be some obstruction.

Willing the transporter to operate, as if that would do any good, Kirk waited. The shimmer faded, erupted, faded; with one last splash of sparkles, Spock materialized in front of them.

"Spock! My orders were no one was to leave the ship."

"It was necessary, Captain. I could not contact you by communicator, and the transporter is almost useless now. As I told you, there is an unusual power field down here. It seems to be soaking up all kinds of energy at the source. I calculated the rate at which it was growing, and reasoned that we might be able to transport one more person." Spock conveyed, with a lift of his eyebrow, that while white rabbits and such were beyond his comprehension, unexplained force fields were not to be tolerated. "We barely managed that."

Kirk had to approve this decision. "Good. I can use your help."

Sulu said anxiously, "We're stranded down here, Captain?"

"Until we find out what this is all about."

A tiger roared in the distance.

"That way!" said Kirk. "Spread out, find it." He tried not to think about the ineffective phasers.

At the glade, Tonia Barrows and McCoy looked for the others a bit reluctantly. "There's no one here."

"This is the rendezvous point," said McCoy. The girl wandered around the clearing. The doctor followed her slowly. "What was that? I thought—I swear I heard something."

"Don't talk like that!" In spite of the splendid costume and the warm eyes of McCoy, she was still jumpy.

"A princess shouldn't be afraid, not with her brave knight to protect her." Tonia managed a small smile and moved nearer to the shelter of a sun-warmed oak.

"Aaah!" There was a wild flurry of black and white—she was struggling with someone. McCoy ran.

The plumed hat was jaunty; pointed beard, jeweled doublet, swirling cloak. McCoy sailed in, fists flying. The cowardly lecher couldn't fight. Don Juan slunk off.

McCoy held her for a moment as she pulled her gown back together and straightened the tall hat, feeling extremely chivalrous. He had battled for his lady, and he'd do it again.

Hoof beats sounded in the distance. They whirled, and saw, across the meadow, a gigantic horse emerging from the wood. The horse reared and wheeled as its rider perceived them.

McCoy's belief was strained almost to breaking point. The Black Knight lowered a wicked-looking lance and charged.

These fairy-tale characters were interrupting him too often. McCoy had had enough. He was going to deal with this apparition on the proper terms. A figment of the imagination was not real, could do no harm. He was not going to react anymore to hallucinations. He stepped out, unarmed, and confronted the oncoming menace, concentrating on denying the evidence of his senses.

The great black animal pounded across the meadow, the lance couchant.

"Look out, Bones!" McCoy ignored Kirk's cry of warning. Steadily, stubbornly he marched directly toward the galloping rider.

Kirk's phaser failed. He scrambled the old-fashioned pistol that he had confiscated from Sulu from his belt, as the wicked lance took McCoy through the chest.

The horse reared as Tonia Barrows screamed, and the Black Knight bent to retrieve his weapon. Kirk fired rapidly, and the armored horseman crashed to the ground a few yards away. Tonia's shrieks rose shrilly amid the echoes.

She fell to her knees over the prostrate McCoy. "He's dead, he's dead. It's all my fault. It never would have happened… Ohhh!"

"No, Tonia—" said Kirk.

"But it was, it was. My fault. I am to blame!" She was screaming and weeping. "I've killed him, I've killed Leonard." Kirk took her

arm, but she wrenched away from him and beat her fists on the ground.

"Yeoman," said Kirk in his sternest voice. "We're in trouble. I need every crewman alert and thinking."

The hysteria left her cries. "Yes, sir." Struggling for composure, she rose slowly to her feet.

Spock covered McCoy's body, hiding the gaping wound. Kirk turned away for a moment. He could not quite control his face. His friend was dead. Shore leave. And they were all looking to him for strength. He schooled his expression to a rocklike calm, and without looking back, strode purposefully toward Sulu. Sulu was crouching over the body of the Black Knight.

"Captain," he said worriedly, "I don't get this."

"Neither do I, Mr Sulu," said Kirk, staring down with hatred at the sable armor. "But before we leave this planet, *I will*."

"Then you'd better have a look at this, sir." Sulu opened the visor and revealed the face of McCoy's murderer.

"What the—?" Perfectly molded skin, straight nose, regular as a waxwork, the mask stared back at him.

"It's like a dummy, Captain. It couldn't be alive."

"Tricorder?"

"Barely operating, sir."

"Spock!" Kirk handed the instrument to the First Officer. "What do you make of this?"

Spock took readings with some difficulty. "This is not human skin tissue, sir. More resembles the cellular casting we use for wound repairs. Much finer, of course."

"Mr Spock!" Kirk stood up. "I want an exact judgment."

"Definitely a mechanical contrivance. Its tissues resemble the basic cell structure of the plants here—the trees, even the grass—"

Kirk peered at the face again. "Are you suggesting that this is a *plant*, Spock?"

Spock indicated extreme puzzlement by a slight frown. "I'm saying all these things are multicellular castings. The plants, the people, the animals—they're all being manufactured."

"By who? and why?" said Kirk blankly. "And why these particular things?"

Spock shook his head. "All we know for sure is that they act exactly like the real thing. Just as pleasant—or just as deadly."

Esteban Rodriguez had not yet had a chance to report his encounter with the Bengal tiger, which had leaped from the rocks and snarled at him. He had managed to get away, and was telling Yeoman Angela Teller about that and other things as they headed for the glade.

There was a buzzing sound. They looked around, and finally up. Overhead, a Sopwith Camel banked and dipped.

"What is *that?*"

"Of all the crazy things. Remember what I was telling you a little while ago about the early wars in the air, and the funny little vehicles they used?" Angela nodded, looking up at the sky. "Well, that's one of them."

The plane veered back and looped over their heads. Angela eyed it dubiously. "Can it hurt us?"

"Not unless it makes a strafing run." Rodriguez was rather pleased. No one could have asked for a better opportunity to show off his special knowledge. He had never expected to see one of those planes actually flying!

"A what?" She was impressed, he could tell.

"The way they used to attack people on the ground," he said offhandedly.

The biplane's engines roared as it banked and started toward them. It dived. The rat-tat-tat of vintage gunnery tore the air to shreds.

"Santa Maria!" Rodriguez dragged the girl toward the shelter of the nearby rocks. As the plane zoomed away, she dropped.

"Angela!" He lifted her. Her head lolled unnaturally limp, and her weight was dead in his arms.

Kirk and Spock were staring at the distant aircraft when Sulu called them.

The bodies of McCoy and the Black Knight had vanished.

"Look," said Sulu. "They've been dragged away."

They were stranded in a nightmare. "Mr Spock!" said Kirk desperately.

The Vulcan was uncomfortable. "At this point, Captain, my analysis may not sound very scientific."

"McCoy's death is a scientific fact." The one undeniable reality.

"There is one faint possibility. Very unlikely, but nevertheless—Captain, what were your thoughts just before you encountered the people you met here?"

Kirk tried to remember. "I was thinking about… the Academy."

"Hey, Jim baby!"

There he was again. Finnegan. Lolling against a tree across the glade.

"I see you had to bring up reinforcements," he sneered. "Well, I'm still waiting for you, Jim boy!"

Maybe. "Finnegan! What's been happening to my people?"

The cadet, characteristically unhelpful, snickered and ducked back among the trees. His mocking laughter floated back to Kirk, who gritted his teeth.

"Take Mr Sulu. Find McCoy's body. This man's my problem." He started across the glade.

"Captain—" Spock began.

"That's an order, Mr Spock!" Kirk plunged into the trees in Finnegan's wake.

The laughter penetrated the forest. Kirk stalked after it. But it came from the left, and then the right, and straight ahead.

"This way, Jim boy, that's the boy."

He rounded a clump of trees and came on a bare rocky hill. No grass grew here; it was wild and deserted-except for the derisive voice.

"Old legs givin' out, Jimmy boy? Ha-ha-heeheehee!"

The voice came from behind him. He whirled, and it came again from above.

"Just like it used to be, Jim boy, remember? You never could find your head with both hands."

Kirk clenched his fists. He was going to get even with Finnegan if it was the last thing he did.

On a spur to his right, Finnegan called, "Over here, Jimmy boy!"

"Finnegan! I want some answers!"

"Coming up! Ha-ha-hee!" Kirk pursued the elusive voice until he was seething with fury; at last Finnegan stayed long enough on a rock above him for Kirk to start climbing.

With practiced ease, Finnegan met him in a violent bulldogging roll. They fell together to the flat ground and Kirk was briefly aware of a profound satisfaction—at last it had come to a clinch. Finnegan had never lost a fight; you could feel that in his

confidence and skill, and Kirk took the impact of blow after blow without being able to land a really good punch. And he was winded from the chase.

Finnegan stood up and looked down at him. "Get up, get up. Always fight fair, don't you, you officer-and-gentleman, you? You stupid underclassman, I've got the edge." His brogue-tinged voice rang out in triumphant glee. "I'm still twenty years old-look at you! You're an old man!"

Kirk rolled to his feet and swung. Finnegan ducked, slipped and landed hard. Kirk allowed himself a moment to savor this victory.

"Uh-uh," grunted the prostrate cadet. "Jim! I can't move my legs. Ohhh. Me back, it's broken. You've broken me back… Ohhhh!"

Officer and Gentleman. Kirk knelt and carefully straightened his victim's leg. He palpated muscle. Finnegan groaned and shook his head dizzily. Kirk moved closer and probed cautiously. "Can you feel that?"

And he fell flat as Finnegan's clasped hands landed on the nape of his neck in a mighty double chop. Finnegan leaped to his feet, laughing.

" 'Can you feel that?' " he mocked. "Sleep sweet, Jimmy boy. Sleep as long as you like. Sleep forever, Jimmy boy, forever and ever…"

Kirk was not in a position to appreciate this ironic lullaby. Watery images vaguely swam before his eyes, his nose hurt, and the back of his head was resting on a sharp pebble.

Finnegan loomed above him against the sky, hands resting on his hips, shaking his head sadly.

"Won't you ever learn, Jim boy? You never could take me!"

Kirk painfully propped himself up on one elbow and spat blood. He wheezed, "Finnegan. One thing."

Magnanimous, Finnegan said, "Sure, name it."

"Answers!"

He should have known better. "Earn 'em!"

As he started groggily to his feet, Finnegan floored him again.

He lay there for one minute. This had gone too far. Fair or foul, the swaggering hooligan was going to get it. He rolled over, and, summoning all his unarmed-combat training, got on his feet in the same motion. Finnegan gestured, come on, come on, from his defensive crouch. "? wipe that grin off his face," Kirk thought, as

he lunged. He landed a crunching blow and Finnegan reeled, recovered and came back.

It seemed hours of bruising impacts on rib, jaw, arms. It was harder and harder to lift the hand and push it through the air, which had become harder and harder to breathe. Finally, Kirk pounded his last remaining strength into Finnegan's midriff, and the man dropped and lay still. Kirk fell back against the rock and tried to breathe. He had thought he was exhausted before. And he didn't dare close his eyes to blink away the running sweat, lest Finnegan be playing possum again. And he just could not lift his arms.

Finnegan came to, slowly. "Not bad," he said grudgingly.

"Yeah."

"Kinda…ow! Makes up for things, huh, Jim?"

Kirk licked blood off his lip. "A lot of things." Even if he had a black eye. "Now, what has been happening to my people?"

With a touch of his old arrogance, Finnegan smirked. "I never answer questions from Plebes."

"I'm not a plebe. This is *today*, fifteen years later. What are you doing here?"

There was a pause as they looked at each other.

"Being exactly what you expect me to be, Jim boy!" cried Finnegan as he threw a handful of dirt in Kirk's eyes and scrambled to his feet. Kirk lost his balance but landed with one fist heavy in Finnegan's solar plexus. Finnegan closed with him.

Swaying like a couple of drunks with tiredness, neither would give in. But Finnegan wasn't laughing anymore. He'd started dodging Kirk's blows. Kirk thought, he's twenty years old, and he's winded—more winded than the old man! He evaded a wide swing and grabbed a handful of Finnegan's tunic, driving his fist right into the bully's battered face with a final, explosive grunt.

And that was definitely that. Finnegan was out for the count. And Kirk, breathless, bruised and bleeding, felt like crowing. After all these years…

As he felt a grin painfully stretching his cut lip, Spock said, "Did you enjoy it, Captain?"

"Yes," panted Kirk, gloating. "I did enjoy it. For almost half my lifetime, the one thing I wanted was to beat the tar out of Finnegan."

Spock raised his right eyebrow. "This supports a theory I have been formulating…"

"We're all meeting people and things we happen to be thinking about at the moment."

Spock nodded. "Somehow our thoughts are read, then that object is quickly manufactured and provided."

"H'm. So it gets dangerous if we happen to be thinking about—" Kirk stopped hastily.

"We must control our thoughts carefully." Spock, of course, would not find this difficult.

Kirk tried not to think about—no! or… not *that*, either!

"The power field we detected is undoubtedly underground, fabricating these things. Passages lead up to the surface. As, for example, when Rodriguez thought of a tiger—" Even Spock was not infallible, it seemed. There was a snarling roar, and the magnificent head of a Bengal tiger peered at them over the rocks. It padded over the ridge and down out of sight among the shrubs —toward them.

Without moving, Kirk eyed the bushes. "We've got to get back to the others and warn them."

Spock, immobile, murmured, "Yes."

"We have to get out of here."

"Immediately, Captain."

They looked at each other sidewise. "You go first, Spock. I'll try and distract him."

"I can't let you do that, sir. I'll distract him." The tiger waited patiently for them to make the first move. It waited, crouching, then settled down. It began to lick its paws.

"We could try moving very slowly."

With extreme caution, Kirk extended a foot. The tiger watched interestedly. He leaned weight on the foot and achieved a step. Spock glided beside him as they edged around the rock. They ran like hell.

Behind them, the tiger turned itself off.

Rodriguez fell out of the shrubbery in their path. "Angela! The plane—" On cue, the Sopwith Camel appeared overhead in mid-dive. Kirk threw himself and his men to the ground as 50-caliber machine-gun bullets plowed the path at their side.

"Don't think about it!" said Kirk. "To the glade, fast!"

"Hai!" The Japanese warrior in his heavy complex armor flailed at them with a sharp sword. "Ahh-HOU!" But he was hampered by his carapace, and they dodged him easily.

As they reached the glade, Yeoman Barrows seemed to be in difficulties again. Sulu was wrestling with the bearded amorist in the black cloak as she clutched her tattered tunic in front of her; apparently she had been changing out of her princess's dress when accosted.

But Don Juan melted away as Kirk and Spock pelted up to them.

"Sulu, Rodriguez, Barrows—front and center!" snapped Kirk.

"Sir—"

"Don't ask any questions. This is an order!" They moved in to face him, Tonia squirming into her uniform.

"Now brace. Everyone, eyes front. Don't talk. Don't breathe. Don't think. You're at attention and concentrating on that and only that. Concentrate!"

The three crewmen obediently struggled not to think.

Spock gestured, and Kirk turned to see a new apparition. A kindly old gentleman in dignified robes smiled at him.

"Who are you?" From whose errant thoughts had this one appeared?

"I am the Caretaker of this planet, Captain Kirk."

"You know me?"

"But of course." He nodded toward the bewildered crewmen. "And Lieutenant Rodriguez, Lieutenant Sulu, Yeoman Barrows—and Mr Spock."

The dangers in this place had not, so far, appeared in sheep's clothing. They had been all obvious threats. Perhaps…

"I stopped by to check our power supplies, and have only just realized that we had guests who did not understand all this. These experiences were intended to amuse you."

Kirk was taken aback. "*Amuse* us! Is that your word for all we've been through?"

The man laughed easily. "Oh, none of this is permanent." He waved at the surrounding glade, the forest, the meadows. "Here you have merely to imagine your fondest wishes—old ones you wish to relive, new ones, battle, fear, love, triumph. Anything which pleases you can be made to happen here."

"The term," said Spock, out of the encyclopedia he housed in his brain, "is 'amusement park.' "

"But of course." The Caretaker sounded as though this were perfectly obvious.

"An old Earth term for a place where people could go to see and do all kinds of exciting and fantastic things."

"This planet was constructed for our race of people, Captain. We come here, and play."

Sulu was puzzled. "Play? As advanced as you are, and you still play?"

The Caretaker looked at him pityingly. Kirk waved Sulu to silence. "Play, Mr Sulu. The more complex the mind, the greater the need for the simplicity of play."

The robed figure beamed approvingly. "Exactly, Captain. You are most perceptive.

"I regret that your equipment was inadvertently affected. The system needed slight adjustment—it was pulling energy from the nearest available source. I think you will find that all is now in order."

But it hadn't been all play. The fight with Finnegan had been extremely satisfying; the tiger had, after all, harmed no one; and Tonia's virtue was still intact. But…

"None of this explains the death of my ship's surgeon," said Kirk. The "amusement park" of an advanced race had turned killer for the younger people. The Caretaker's face was gentle and his words reassuring, but perhaps the toys of his race were too dangerous.

"Possibly because I haven't died, Jim," said McCoy's voice behind him. Yeoman Barrows turned pale, and then radiant with joy.

McCoy sauntered into the clearing, in the pink of health, with a young lady clad in a few feathers clinging to each of his arms.

"I was taken below the surface," he explained, glancing at his chest, "for some rather—remarkable—repairs. It's amazing! There's a factory complex down there like nothing I've ever seen. They can build anything—immediately!"

Tonia had run to him, and was gazing into his face as if she could not believe her eyes. She touched his chest, last seen torn and bleeding. She became conscious of an obstruction and belatedly realized that McCoy was not alone.

She found her tongue. "And how do you explain *them?*"

"Er—" McCoy glanced fondly at the two voluptuous, bare, willing beauties on his arms. "Well, I was thinking about a little cabaret I know on Rigel II. There were these two girls in the chorus line that I—well—" his assurance faltered. "Er—here they are."

Tonia looked. He said, "Well, after all, I am on shore leave."

"So am I," said Tonia ominously.

"Er—" McCoy would just have to spread himself around. "So you are."

Yeoman Barrows waited.

Resigning himself to the not-unattractive inevitable, McCoy released the charmers. "Well, girls, I'm sure you can turn something up."

The girls smiled a cheerful farewell to the doctor and moved. To Sulu's evident delight, the redhead chose to nestle up to him. Spock, however, did not appear gratified at the armful of blonde that approached him. He dodged politely, but to no avail. She insinuated herself somehow and stood alarmingly close.

Rodriguez said, very quietly, "And—Angela?"

"Esteban!" she said, hurrying out of the shrubbery. "I've been looking all over for you!" He took her hand and stared, unbelievingly.

The Caretaker smiled upon all these couples, even at the restive Spock. "We regret that you have been made uncomfortable, even puzzled."

Kirk had relaxed enough to be curious. "You say your people built this? Who are you? What planet are you from?"

The Caretaker shook his white head. "Your race is not yet ready to understand us, Captain Kirk."

Spock, still trying to tactfully disentangle himself from the cabaret girl, replied, "I tend to agree."

The communicator beeped. "This is the bridge, Captain. Our power systems have come back in. Do you require any assistance?"

"Everything is in order, Lieutenant Uhura. Stand by." It seemed now that everything was indeed in order. But…

"With the proper caution, our amusement planet could be an ideal place for your people to enjoy themselves, if you wish," said the Caretaker.

McCoy, now firmly attached to Yeoman Barrows, said, "It *is* what the doctor ordered, Jim.".

"Very well… Bridge! I'll be sending up a short briefing. As soon as all personnel have heard it, you may commence transporting shore parties. And tell them to prepare for the best shore leave they've ever had!"

As Kirk shut his communicator, Mr Spock approached him, still surrounded by pink feathers and bare legs. "I'll go back aboard,

Captain. With all due respect to the young lady, I've had about all the shore leave I care for."

The young lady, acknowledging defeat, joined her companion. Sulu did not seem to mind.

"No, Mr Spock, I'll go. You—"

Ruth glided out from the forest canopy and held out her hands, smiling.

"On the other hand, perhaps I'll stay for a day or two…" said the Captain, leaving Spock to his own devices.

Later, Spock greeted them, impassive as ever. He shook his head as he looked at their suntanned faces.

"Enjoy your shore leave, gentlemen?"

Kirk met McCoy's amused eye. "That we did, Mr Spock. That we did!"

Spock stared at them, puzzled. They seemed full of satisfaction. He shrugged.

"Most illogical," he said with finality. The *Enterprise* departed at Warp Factor One amid the guffaws of the Captain and the ship's surgeon.

THE SQUIRE OF GOTHOS

(Paul Schneider)

The planet had given no hint of its existence to the *Enterprise*. Uncharted, unsuspected, undetected, it finally confessed its presence to the Starship's sensors. At Spock's sudden announcement of their new reading, Kirk in some annoyance flipped a switch—and sure enough, out of what should have continued to be the empty, star-void quadrant of space they were traversing, a crescent-shaped body swam into abrupt, unusually brilliant, magnified focus on the bridge viewing screen.

Kirk glared at it. It was an unwelcome distraction from his job—a mission to get needed supplies to Colony Beta 6; and get them there by an uninterrupted warp factor three speed across this apparent space desert, barren of stars. He spoke tersely. "Navigation report."

Crewman De Salle looked up from his computations. "Iron-silicate substance, Captain, planet-sized magnitude One-E. We'll be passing close."

The puzzled Spock had left his station to come and stand by the command chair. Eyes on the screen, he said, "It is incredible that this body has gone unrecorded on all our charts, sir."

So, Kirk thought, imagination must bestir itself, stretching the credible to include the incredible. There was a certain dryness in his retort. "But there it is, Mr Spock, incredible though it be." He swung around to face his bridge people. "We can't stop to investigate now. All science stations will gather data for computer banks. Lieutenant Uhura, report the discovery of this planet on subspace radio."

She struggled to obey the order. Then she turned. "Strong interference on subspace, sir. The planet must be a natural radio source."

"Then let's get out of its range," Kirk said. He twisted his chair around to the helm console. "Veer off forty degrees, Mr Sulu."

As Sulu reached for a control on his board, he disappeared. One moment he was there, substantial, familiar, intently competent—

and, the next, his chair was as empty as though vacancy had always been its appointed function. "*Sulu!*" Kirk shouted, leaping for the helm. Then he, too, was gone, vanished as utterly as Sulu. Navigator De Salle, taut-faced, sprang from his station. "They're *gone*, Mr Spock! *They're both gone!*"

Spock, at the abandoned command console, twisted a dial. Obediently, alarm sirens shrieked through the ship. It was the beginning of a general, deck-to-deck scrutiny of its every nook and cranny. As Spock dismissed the last discouraged search party, he turned to the big, blond meteorologist beside him. "They're either down on that planet—or nowhere." Overhearing, De Salle said tensely, "But there's still no sign of human life on the surface, sir. Of course the probe instruments may be malfunctioning."

Spock eyed his board. "They are functioning normally," he said. "Continue sensor sweeps. Lieutenant Uhura, have you covered all wave-bands?"

"All of them, sir. No response."

De Salle was on his feet. "With due respect, sir, I request permission to transport down to the surface to carry the search on there!"

McCoy had joined the group at the command chair. Now he grabbed Spock's arm. "I agree! What are we waiting for, Spock?"

"The decision will be mine, Doctor. I hold the responsibility for your safety." Blandly ignoring McCoy's out raged glare, he addressed the big meteorologist. "Dr Jaeger, please describe your geophysical findings on the surface below."

"No detectable soil or vegetation… extremely hot. The atmosphere is toxic, swept by tornadic storms… continuous volcanic activity… inimical to any life as we know it, without oxygen life support."

"How would you estimate the survival time of two unprotected men down there?"

"As long as it would take to draw one breath."

Nobody spoke. Then Uhura broke the heavy stillness. "Mr Spock! My viewing screen! Look!" All eyes on the bridge veered to her station. There on the screen, letters—letters formed in flowing, old-English script—had begun to appear. Gradually they extended themselves until the message they were intended to convey had completed itself. Astoundingly out of tune with the somber mood of the bridge people, it was: "Greetings and felicitations."

Spock read it aloud without inflection. "Greetings… and… felicitations. Send this, Lieutenant. U.S.S. *Enterprise* to signaler on

planet surface. Identify yourself. We—" He broke off as more letters assembled themselves into words on the screen. After a moment, he read them aloud, too, slowly, unbelievingly. "Hip… hip… hurrah," he said, "and I believe that last word is pronounced tallyho'?"

"Some kind of joke, sir?" De Salle said.

Spock glanced at him. "I shall entertain any theories, Mr De Salle. Any at all…"

McCoy spoke up. "One thing is certain. There *is* life on that planet!"

"You would seem to be correct, Doctor," Spock said. He reached for the intercom; and had just ordered preparation of the Transporter Room when Scott, pushing his way toward him, reached him and said, "Request assignment to the search party, sir."

Sometimes Spock's eyes seemed to be looking at one from a great distance. They had that faraway look in them now as he shook his head. "No, Mr Scott. Neither you nor I can be spared here. Mr De Salle, you will equip landing party with full armaments, with life support and communication gear. Doctor Jaeger, your geophysical knowledge may be crucial. Doctor McCoy will accompany, too. If those peculiar signals come from Captain Kirk and Sulu, their rationality is in question."

He waited to issue his final order until the landing group had taken position on the Transporter Platform's indentations. Then, handing De Salle a black box, he said, "Once on the surface, you will establish immediate contact with us—and by this laser beam, if necessary."

Scott worked his switches. And the three figures began their dissolution into shining fragments.

They hadn't precisely formulated what they had expected. A kind of murderous combine of earth tremors, buffetings by hurricane whirlwinds, the suffocating heat of a planet torn by cosmic forces at war below the fissured lava of its tormented surface, the coughing inhalation of lung-searing gases. But what they found differed from their vaguely shaped apprehensions. It was a forest, cool, green, its leafy aisles tranquil, shadowy. Around the boles of its trees, flowering vines circled, scenting the fresh air with their blossoms' fragrance. Dumbfounded, McCoy watched a leaf flutter down from the bough over his head.

His voice was thick through his life-support filter. "Jaeger, where are your storms?"

Shaking his head, the meteorologist checked the instrument he held. "An atmosphere, McCoy—exactly the same as our own!"

Remembering, De Salle, removing his face mask, cried, "Ship communication and report!" But something was wrong with his communicator—a contagious wrongness that affected all their communicators. De Salle didn't give up. As he pointed the laser beam skyward, he said, "Keep trying… keep trying." Then he frowned. "Something's blocking this beacon. Got to find open ground…"

Backing off, he rounded a clump of bush. And halted, noting the reflection of flickering light on its dark leaves. Very slowly he turned. He was face to face with a stone griffin. Its wings were lifted high over the glaring features of its lion's visage. In one outstretched talon, it held a flaming torch.

"Dr McCoy! Dr Jaeger! Over here!"

There were two griffins, both holding torches. It was McCoy who first spotted the dark, massive, iron-bound door flanked by its guardian beasts of heraldry. The door was ajar. De Salle, moving into the lead, unlimbered his phaser. Followed by the others, he pushed through the half-open entry. Except for the crackling of what looked like a big hearth fire, absolute stillness greeted them.

"In the name of heaven… where are we?" McCoy muttered.

Where they were was in a spacious Victorian drawing room, chandelier-lit. The wall over the burning logs of its fireplace held an arrangement of crossed swords, muskets, pistols and battle flags. Its other walls were hung with tapestries, with portraits of ancestors in armor, in the colorful uniforms of the Napoleonic wars. Near a gleaming mahogany table, a sideboard glittered with gold dishes. A harpsichord stood under a curved, gilt-framed mirror. All was in order. Everything fitted into the picture of a benevolently self-indulgent Victorianism. Except for one thing. Certain niches pressed into the urbane walls revealed a peculiar taste in statuary. They held carved shapes of lizard-like creatures, tortured-looking dolphins, a pair of giant, humanoid forms—and a tentacled spider-thing.

Suddenly, De Salle shouted: "*Look!*"

At the end of the room was an inset, a hollow gouged prominently out of its wall. As the other niches held statuary, this one held the stiffened forms of Kirk and Sulu, their attitudes caught and hardened as they had last moved at the instant before their disappearance. Their figures were bathed in a violet light. De Salle rushed to them, calling, "Dr McCoy—quick! Dr McCoy!"

But McCoy's health monitor was grimly factual. He looked up from it, his face tired-looking. "Nothing," he said. "Kirk and Sulu… like waxwork shapes…"

The drawing room's door slammed shut. A moment later, a tinkling Mozart-like arpeggio came from the harpsichord. And seated on the bench before it was the player—a man, a man clad in the silver-buckled elegance of a military man of the mid-1800's—a delighted if slightly sly smile on his rosy face.

As the *Enterprise* trio stared at him, he completed the musical passage with a flourish of well-groomed hands. Then he spun around to face them. He was Byronically handsome, from his pouting mouth and neckcloth-length hair to his disdainful air of superiority, of being set apart as an object of special and peculiar value and privilege. The gesture he made toward the hollow holding the forms of Kirk and Sulu was either genuinely bored—or the blossom of a painstaking cultivation of boredom.

"I must say," the musician said amiably, "that they make an exquisite display pair." Then a note of regret drooped the voice. "But I suppose you'll want them back now."

A lace-cuffed hand was lifted. Instantly, Kirk started forward, completing his interrupted move to the helm of the *Enterprise*. Sulu stirred, his face confused, his eyes bewildered. They sought Kirk's face. "Captain, where are we?"

The man on the harpsichord bench rose. "Welcome to my island of peace on this stormy little planet of Gothos."

Kirk ignored him to speak to his men. "What's happened? Fill me in."

McCoy said, "Jim, you disappeared from the bridge after Sulu went. We've been hunting you for hours—"

Their host cut across him. "You must excuse my whimsical way of fetching you here. But when I saw you passing by, I simply could not resist entertaining you."

Kirk, exchanging a glance with McCoy, stepped forward. "I am Captain James Kirk of the United Starship *Enterprise*…"

The creature swept him a bow. "So you are the captain of these brave men! My greetings and felicitations, Captain. It's so good of you and your officers to drop in. Absolutely smashing of you!"

The theatricality of the voice and gesture was as turgid as old greasepaint. Kirk had to make an effort to keep his voice level. "Who are you?" he said. "Where do you come from?"

An arm swept wide in a grandly embracing movement. "Have no fear, lads," said the too-rich voice. "I have made myself as one of

you…"

De Salle's temper, compounded of fear mingled with rage, exploded. He advanced, his phaser on aim. "Who are you? That is the question that was asked you! Answer it! And make the answer fast!"

The being appreciated De Salle. "Ah, such spirited ferocity!" it crowed happily. Then, not unlike a child remembering lessons in manners, it said, "Oh, forgive me. General Trelane, retired. At your service, gentlemen. My home is your home."

It failed to soothe De Salle's temper. Low-voiced, he spoke to Kirk. "Captain, we've lost contact with the ship. We're trapped here."

Overhearing, General Trelane rubbed his hands in exuberant pleasure. " 'Trapped here,'" he echoed. "I cannot tell you how it delights me—having visitors to this very planet I have made my hobby. From my observations I did not think you capable of such voyages."

Jaeger, whispering to Kirk, gestured around them. "Captain, note the period—nine hundred light-years from Earth. This place and time fit what might have been seen if there were telescopes powerful enough to—"

He was stopped by the smile on Trelane's full red lips. "Yes. I have been an interested witness of your lively little doings on your lively little Earth, sir…"

"Then you've been witnessing its doings of nine hundred years past," Kirk said. "That's a long time."

Trelane chuckled. "Good heavens, have I made a time error? How fallible of me!" Eyeing the stately room around him, he added, "I did so want to make you feel at home. In fact, I am quite proud of the detail."

"General Trelane—" Kirk began; and stopped at the coyly cautionary finger that had been held up. "Tut-tut, a retired general, sir. Just Squire Trelane, now. You may call me 'Squire'—indeed, I rather fancy the title."

In his career as a Starship captain, Kirk had encountered many oddments of galactic creation—oddments ranging from the ultimately hideous and alien, to a beauty that spoke with the final familiarity of wonder to the soul. At this moment, face to face with this self-styled squire of a self-chosen time of a Victorian England, chosen out of all the times offered by nine hundred years, he seemed to be face to face with the last anomaly—an X of mystery compounded simultaneously of innocence and guile. He looked at

Squire Trelane. "For what purpose have you imprisoned us here?" he asked.

Even as he spoke, he had the sense of spider-strands, sticky, well-woven, encompassing him. It was as though he had already heard what the too-rich voice was saying. "Imprisoned? Nonsense! You are my guests." His host's lower lip actually trembled with what suggested itself as the touching eagerness of hospitality. "You see, I was just completing my studies of your curious and fascinating society. You happened by at a most propitious moment." There was a low, carved, armless chair beside him and he flung himself into it. "Captain Kirk, you must tell me all about your campaigns—your battles—your missions of conquest…"

For the first time, Kirk seemed to know where he was. For the first time since Sulu's disappearance from the *Enterprise*, he felt a sense of firm identity, of some unnamable stability back under his feet. "Our missions are peaceful," he said. "They are not for conquest. We battle only when we have no choice."

Trelane winked ,at him. His left eyelid dropped and rose in inescapable suggestion of mutual, known, if unacknowledged awareness of perfidious doings in high places. "So that's the official story, eh, Captain?"

Unobtrusively, McCoy had directed his tricorder at Trelane. Just as unobtrusively, Kirk had registered this fact. Now he stepped toward the low, armless chair. "Squire Trelane," he said, "I must ask you to let us return to our ship."

What he got was a languid wave of a languid hand. "Wouldn't hear of it!" Trelane protested. "You will all join me in a repast. There is so much I must learn from you: your *feelings* about war… about killing… about conquest—that sort of thing." A finger of the languid hand became unlanguid. It stiffened, pointed, aiming at Kirk. "You are, you know," said Trelane, "one of the new predator species—species that preys even on itself."

De Salle, beside Kirk, seemed to go suddenly thick in the neck. His hand darted to his phaser. "Sir?" he said, half in question, half in appeal.

"On 'stun,' De Salle," Kirk said. "Don't kill him."

What was it about this being that both repelled and at the same time broke your heart? A capacity for communicating loneliness, that burden of the solitary self-borne either in a conscious fortitude or in a necessity of unaware resentment and complaint? It was speaking, the strange being. "De Salle—is that his name, Captain Kirk?" In its eagerness it didn't wait for an answer but rushed on, crying to the navigator, "*Vous etes un vrai francais?*"

"My ancestry is French… Yes…"

"Ah, *monsieur! Vive la gloire! Vive Napoleon!* I admire your Napoleon very much, y'know."

"Mr De Salle is our navigator," Kirk said evenly. "This gentleman is our medical officer, Dr McCoy—our helmsman, Sulu, and our meteorologist, Carl Jaeger…"

Trelane acknowledged each introduction. "Welcome, good physicianer. All reverence to your ancestors, Honorable Sir…"

Sulu flushed. "What's he doing—kidding?"

But Trelane's interest had fixed on Jaeger. Clicking his heels, he cried, "*Und Offizier Jaeger, die deutsche Soldat, nein?*" Then stamping his feet in cadence to his words, he declaimed, "*Eins, zwei, drei, vier! Gehen wir mit dem Schiessgewehr!*"

Jaeger's voice was dry as dead bone. "I am a scientist—not a military man."

Trelane beamed at him. "Come now, we are all military men under the skin. And how we do love our uniforms!" He clearly loved his—and the sight of himself in it, epauletted, be-braided as the gilt-framed mirror that reflected it back to him flushed his face with self-admiring pride. He turned, preening to get a three-quarter view of his cuirass of shining buttons; and Kirk, under his breath, spoke to De Salle. "*Now!*" But as the phaser lifted to aim, Trelane wheeled, lifting his hand. At once, De Salle stiffened into immobility.

"What is that interesting weapon you have there?" inquired the Squire of Gothos. He removed the phaser—and thaw replaced the frozen stillness of De Salle's figure. "Ah, yes, I see! That won't kill—but this will! The mechanism is now clear to me." Making an adjustment, he fired the phaser at the niche containing the lizard-like sculpture. It dematerialized. Trelane laughed with delight. "Oh, how marvelous!" Swinging the weapon around, he shot at all the statues set in their niches around the room, yelling as each disintegrated and vanished. "Devastating!" howled Trelane. "Why this could kill millions."

Striding up to him, Kirk tore the phaser from his hand. "Beginning with whom, Trelane? My crew? Are we your next targets?"

The full red lips pouted. "But how absolutely typical of your species, Captain! You don't understand, so you're angry." He pointed a gleeful finger at Kirk. "But do not be impatient. I have anticipated your next wish. You wish to know how I've managed all this, don't you?"

He nodded in answer to his own question. Then, weaving his fingers together like a prissy English schoolmaster about to dissertate on Virgil's prosody, he said, "We—meaning others and myself—have, to state the matter briefly, perfected a system by which matter can be changed to energy… and then back to matter…"

"Like the Transporter system aboard the *Enterprise*," Kirk said.

"Oh, that's a crude example! Ours is an infinitely more sophisticated process. You see, we not only transport matter from place to place but we can alter its shape, too, at will."

"This drawing room then," Kirk said. "You created it? By rearranging the existing matter of the planet?"

"Quite," Trelane said.

"But how—"

The creature drew a soothing finger across a furrow of irritation that had appeared on its brow. "Dear Captain, your inquiries are becoming tiresome. Why? I want you to be happy—to free your mind of care. Let us enjoy ourselves in the spirit of martial good fellowship!"

Kirk turned quietly to his men. "Let's go. We're getting out of here."

"Naughty captain!" Trelane said. "Fie, you are quite rude. But you cannot leave here. What an admirably fiery look of protest! Upon my soul, I admire you, sir, though in mercy you seem to need another demonstration of my authority—"

His right hand made a swift gesture; and where Kirk had stood was emptiness. Then he was back—but on his knees, racked by choking paroxysms of agony. Dismissed from the shelter of Trelane's domain, he had been exposed to the blasting effects of the planet's lethal atmosphere. In a moment its toxic gases had licked into his lungs. He coughed, doubled over, still tortured by their strangulating vapors—and the Squire of Gothos patted his bent head.

"That was an example," he said, "of what can occur away from my kindly influence. I do hope that you will now behave yourself, Captain, not only for your own sake, but because, if you don't, I shall be very angry."

Power. It had nothing to do with morality, with responsibility. Like Trelane's, it simply existed—a fact to which the body was obliged to bow but which the heart could continue to reject, to despise.

"Let me hold on," Kirk thought.

The sensors of the *Enterprise* had finally located Trelane's cool green oasis. Scott, staring at its tranquil trees on the bridge viewing screen, said, "An area as peaceful as Earth. But how do you explain it, Mr Spock?"

"I don't, Mr Scott. It just is. Artificial, perhaps—a freak of nature. But the fact remains that life could exist in that space. See if you can tune the sensors down finer. See if you can pick up any sentient life forms in that area of Gothos."

As Scott moved to obey, he said, "Even if we find any, it doesn't follow that it would be our people, sir."

"No. But if the captain is alive and down there, *he has to be there in that place*. I shall try to transport up any thinking beings our sensors detect."

"Shootin' in the dark, Mr Spock."

The retort was unanswerable. "Would you rather stand by and do nothing?"

At the same moment, in the drawing room of Trelane Hall, Kirk and his men were being herded past a cabinet. "And in here," its owner was boasting, "is an array of your battle flags and pennants, some dating back to the Crusades, to Hannibal's invaders, the hordes of Persia!"

Nobody looked at the display. Undaunted, the enthusiastic Trelane addressed Kirk. "Can you imagine it, Captain? The thousands—no, the millions—who have marched off to death singing beneath these banners! Doesn't it make your blood run swiftly to think of it?" In his exuberance, he rushed to the harpsichord to bang out some martial music. Under the cover of its noise, Sulu whispered, "Captain, where could he possibly come from? Who is this maniac?"

McCoy, his voice lowered, said, "Better ask 'what' is he. I monitored him. What I found was unbelievable."

Kirk was staring intently at the musician. Now he spoke, anticipating McCoy's news. "He's not alive."

"No, Jim. Not as we define life. No trace. Zero."

"You mean, your readings show he's dead?" Sulu asked.

"They don't even show that he exists, either alive or dead."

Jaeger pointed to the fireplace. "Notice that wood fire, Captain. Burning steadily—ember-bed red and glowing—yet it gives off no heat at all."

Kirk, moving quietly the length of the room, opened his communicator. Briefly, his voice toneless, he brought Spock up-to-date on the current situation.

"Fire without heat," Spock echoed reflectively. "It would seem, Captain, that the being mistakes all these things it has created for manifestations of present-day Earth. Apparently, it is oblivious of the time differential."

"Yes, Mr Spock. Whatever it is we are dealing with, it is certainly not all-knowledgeable. He makes mistakes."

"And strangely simple ones. He has a flaw, sir."

"We'll work on it, Mr Spock. Kirk out." As he snapped off his communicator, he realized that the music had stopped; and that Trelane, turning, was smiling at him. It was a sly smile, its slyness at variance with the joviality of his tone. "Discussing deep-laid plans, I'll wager. Captain, I can't wait to see them unfold."

Kirk took a firm step forward. "Trelane, I haven't planned any—"

A reproving finger was coyly waggled at him. "Ah, you mustn't believe that I deplore your martial virtues of deception and stratagem! Quite the contrary—I have nothing but esteem for your whole species!"

"If your esteem is genuine"—Kirk paused to draw a deep breath —"then you must respect our sense of duty, too. Our ship is in need of us—we have tasks to perform—schedules to honor…"

"Oh, but I can't bear to let you go. I was getting a bit bored until you came." He whirled on his bench to run off a bragging cadenza on the harpsichord. "You'll have to stay. I insist."

"For how long?"

"Until it's over, of course," Trelane said.

"Until what's over?"

Trelane shrugged. "Dear Captain, so many questions… Why worry about an inevitably uncertain future? Enjoy yourself today, my good sir. Tomorrow—why, it may never come at all. Indeed, when it arrives, it has already become today."

The phrase "slippery as an eel" suddenly occurred to Kirk. He made another try. "Trelane, even if we wanted to stay, our companions are missing us. They need us."

"I must try to experience your sense of concern with you, your grief at the separation." The harpsichord wailed a mournful minor passage, sentimental, drippy.

Kirk gritted his teeth. "There are four hundred men and women on board our ship waiting for—"

"Women!" A discordant chord crashed from the instrument. "You don't actually mean members of the fair sex are among your crew! How charming! No doubt they are very beautiful!" Trelane, leaping to his feet, clapped his hands. "And I shall be so very gallant to them! Here, let me fetch them down to us at once!"

He had lifted his arm when Kirk jumped forward, "Absolutely not!"

"No?"

"No!" Kirk shouted. "This game has gone far enough. Our feminine crew members are crucial operating personnel! You can't just remove them from—"

Trelane stamped his foot. "I can do anything I like! I thought you would have realized that by now!"

McCoy spoke. "Jim! I am receiving a Transporter signal!"

Trelane started wringing his hands. "What does he mean? You must tell me!"

"It means the party's over, thanks to Mr Spock! That's what it means, Trelane"—and Kirk, signaling to his men, assumed the Transporting stance. As the others followed suit, Trelane hurried up to them. "Wait!" he screamed. "What are you doing? I haven't dismissed you. Stop! I won't have this!"

The drawing room, the florid, furious face disappeared; and this time it was Spock who hurried up to them as they shimmered into full shape on the Transporter platform.

"Captain! Are you all right?"

Kirk stepped off the platform. "Report, Mr Spock. How were the scanners able to penetrate that radiation field?"

"They didn't, sir. Not clearly. We merely beamed up all the life forms within a given space."

McCoy broke in. "Jim, that confirms what I said. Trelane is not a life form as we know it—or he'd be coming through the Transporter now."

Kirk nodded. Then he snapped out orders. "Prepare to warp out at once! Maximum speed! Everyone to stations!"

In the bridge, the substitute personnel quickly resigned their posts to Sulu and De Salle. The pretty yeoman on duty rushed up to Kirk. "Oh, Captain," cried Teresa Ross, "we were all so worried about you!" What she meant was, "I was worried about you, James Kirk"—and Kirk, gravely acknowledging her concern, said, "Thank you, Yeoman Ross." Then he was on the intercom. "Scotty! I want every ounce of power your engines have. We're going to

put a hundred million miles between us and that madman down there."

"Aye, sir. Welcome back, Captain."

McCoy was staring at the hand he had extended. "I'm quaking," he said. "Jim, I'm quaking—but I don't know if it's with laughter or with terror!"

Uhura looked away from her board, her eyes bright with curiosity. "What was it? What's down there on Gothos?" she asked.

"Something I hope I forget to tell my grandchildren about…"

Then McCoy noted the astounded expression on Teresa's face. "Look—!" she whispered. Spock had jumped to his feet, staring.

Across the bridge in the angle made by its wall and elevator shaft, Trelane stood. He was uniformed, resplendent, a sabre scabbard attached to his cummerbund. His hands were clasped behind his back and he was looking the *Enterprise* bridge over. After a moment, he spoke. "But where are all the weapons? Don't you display your weapons?"

Kirk rose slowly to his feet. Trelane made a benevolently reassuring gesture. "Don't fret, Captain. I'm only a little upset with you." He was glancing around at the bridge people.

He said, "This Mr Spock you mentioned—the one responsible for the imprudent act of taking you from me. Which is he, Captain?"

Spock said, "I am Mr Spock."

"Surely," said Trelane, "you are not an *officer*." He turned in amazement—real or feigned, who could know?—to Kirk. "He isn't quite human, is he?"

"My father," Spock said, "is from the planet Vulcan."

"Are its natives predatory?"

"Not specifically," Spock said solemnly.

Trelane made a dismissing gesture. "No. I should think not." He made an elaboration of turning to Kirk. "You *will* see to his punishment?"

"On the contrary," Kirk said. "I commend his action."

The full fed lips pursed in their habitual pout. "But I don't like him."

Kirk won his battle for control. Tonelessly, he said, "Trelane, get off my ship! I've had enough of you!"

"Nonsense, Captain. You're all coming back with me."

The victory for control was abruptly lost. There was an obscenity about Trelane's middle-aged willfulness. Flaring, Kirk yelled, "We're

not going anywhere! This ship is leaving here whether you—"

"Fiddle-de-dee," Trelane retorted. "I have a perfectly enchanting sojourn on Gothos planned for you. And I won't have you spoil it."

In a kind of prophetic awareness, Kirk knew what Trelane would do. He did it. Saying, "The decor of my drawing room is much more appropriate…" He raised his arm.

And the *Enterprise* bridge was replaced by the drawing room. All that was different were the positions of the bridge people. De Salle and Sulu were seated at a dining table, laden with dishes of unidentifiable but delicious-looking foods. Uhura found herself on the bench before the harpsichord. And Trelane, completing the sentence spoken on the *Enterprise*, said, "And much more tasteful, don't you think?"

Sulu looked at the wall niches emptied of their sculptures.

"No," he said.

Trelane gave him an Oriental bow from the waist. "Yes, it is so much more fitting, Honorable Guest." He paused, catching a mirrored glimpse of his well-padded calves in their leg-hose; and the fatuous look of self-admiration on his face exploded the last remnants of De Salle's control.

"You little—!" he snarled and charged Trelane.

Kirk cried out a warning but it came too late. Trelane had made his hand wave—and once again, De Salle went stiff, immovable. Interestedly, Trelane circled him, peering into his frozen face. "Ah, what primitive fury! He is the very soul of sublime savagery!"

Kirk said, "Trelane, let him go." He repeated the sentence. "*I said, 'Let him go!'*"

Trelane stared at him. Then he nodded. "Yes, of course. I forget I must not frighten you too much. But then, you must not provoke me again. For your own sake, I warn you. I am sometimes quite short-tempered." There came another slight move of his hand; and De Salle relaxed the hands that had been reaching for Trelane's throat. Kirk clamped a firm hold on him. Sulu, seizing his other arm, whispered harshly, "De Salle, we don't even have our phasers!"

"Come, everyone!" Trelane, over at the table, pointed to chairs. "Let us forget your bad manners! Let us be full of merry talk and sallies of wit! See, here are victuals to delight the palate and brave company to delight the mind!" Pouring brandy, he offered glasses to McCoy and Sulu. "Partake, good Doctor. And you, Honorable Guest, you likee, too." Then it was the turns of De Salle and Jaeger. "*Allons, enfants! Zum Kampf, mein Herr!*"

His men looked tensely at Kirk. Nodding at the table, he said, "Play along. That's an order!"

As they began to pick halfheartedly at the lavish array of food, Kirk, Spock beside him, was giving Trelane a look of deep concentration. What was the secret of his power? Vain, silly, a showoff and braggart, he yet possessed the secret that had enabled him to establish a habitable enclave on an uninhabitable planet and to do what he said he could do—transport matter at will. In the florid face and features, there was no indication of the acute intelligence required to evolve his tricks. In fact, his look of fatuity was more pronounced than ever as, turning to Kirk, he said, "I fear you are derelict in your social duty, Captain. You have not yet introduced me to the charming contingent of your crew."

There was a small silence before Kirk spoke to Uhura and Teresa. "This is—General Trelane."

"Retired," Trelane corrected him. "However, if you prefer, dear ladies, you may address me simply as the lonely Squire of Gothos."

Still introducing, Kirk said, "This lady is Uhura, our communications officer…"

Trelane went to her, took her hand and bowed over it. "A Nubian prize, eh, Captain? Taken no doubt in one of your raids of conquest. She has the same melting eyes of the Queen of Sheba… the same lovely skin color…"

With a poorly disguised shudder, Uhura pulled her hand free; and unfazed, brashly melodramatic as ever, Trelane turned to Teresa. "And this lady?" Hand over heart, he burst into recitation.

"Is this the face that launched a thousand ships

And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?

Fair Helen, make me immortal with a kiss!"

Teresa flushed, stepping back; and Kirk, to distract Trelane's unwelcome attention from her, went on quickly. "Yeoman Teresa Ross. You've met Mr Spock, our Science Officer." Trelane looked Spock up and down. "You realize," he said, "it is only in deference to the Captain that I brought you down?"

"Affirmative," Spock said.

"I don't think I like your tone. It's most challenging. Is that what you're doing—challenging me?"

"I object to you," Spock said. "I object to intellect without discipline; to power without purpose."

"Why, Mr Spock," cried Trelane, "you *do* have a saving grace! You're ill mannered… the human half of you, no doubt. But I am

wasting time…" He grabbed Teresa's hands. "Come, my wood nymph! Dance with your swain! And you, dear Nubian beauty, give us some sprightly music!"

"I do not know how to play this instrument," Uhura said.

"Of course you do!"

Uhura looked at Kirk. Then, turning, she fingered the harpsichord keyboard; and was startled to hear the rush of notes ripple from under her hands. Trelane swept Teresa into his arms and burst into a wildly gyrating waltz with her.

"Captain, how far do we go along with this charade?"

It was Sulu's question. Kirk's response was tightly grim. "Until we can think our way out of here. Meanwhile, we'll accept his hospitality…"

McCoy snorted with disgust. "Hospitality!" He replaced his laden plate on the table. "You should try his food, Jim. Straw would be tastier than this pheasant. As to the brandy in this glass, plain water has more taste. Nothing he has served has any taste at all."

Spock spoke meditatively. "Food that has no flavor. Wine that has no taste. Fire that gives no heat Added up, it would seem to suggest that, though Trelane knows all the Earth forms, he knows nothing whatever of their substance."

"And if he's that fallible, he can't be all-powerful. That means he's got something helping him."

"I agree, sir," Spock said.

"A machine. A device—something which does these things for him." Kirk's eyes narrowed as he watched the cavorting Trelane halt his dance briefly in order to adore himself in the walled mirror. "Ah, my dear," he cried to Teresa, "don't we make a graceful pair… except for one small detail. That dress you wear hardly matches this charming scene!" Then, Trelane, his eyes fixed on the mirror, lifted that hand of his. Teresa vanished—and immediately reappeared. She was wearing the billowing silks of a luxurious eighteenth-century gown. Diamond bracelets sparkled on her gloved arm; and in her hair glittered a pointed tiara of brilliants.

"Now that's more what we want!" Trelane shouted in delight. "I, the dashing warrior—and you, his elegant lady!"

It was another too impressive demonstration of his extraordinary powers. McCoy's voice was tight. "Three thousand years ago, he would have been considered a god… a little god of war." He gave a short, angry laugh. "How surprised the ancients would have been to see—not the grim-visaged brute they

visualized as a war god—but a strutting dandy, spreading his peacock's tail in a mirror!"

Kirk echoed the word. "Mirror. That mirror is part of his audience. It's a piece of his ego. He never wanders far from it"

"Is it ego?" Spock said. "Or something else?"

"Explain," Kirk said.

"The mirror," Spock said.

"What about it?"

"As you said, sir, he never gets much distance away from it. I suppose it could be just vanity."

"No, Mr Spock. He's vain enough—but vanity can't account for his dependence on the mirror." He paused. "What kind of machine could do these things?"

Spock said, "An extremely sophisticated one. In addition to the power to create matter from energy, to guide its shape and motion by thought waves, it would have to have a vast memory bank."

Kirk nodded. "Like a computer. Would you say a machine small enough to be contained in this room could be responsible for maintaining this atmosphere, this house?"

"No, Captain. I think not. Such a device would by necessity be immense—immensely powerful to successfully resist the planet's natural atmosphere."

"Good," Kirk said. "I agree. And that leaves me free…"

"Free for what, Captain?"

"To do something which will seem very strange to you, Mr Spock. Don't think that the strain has got me down. I know exactly what I'm doing."

"Which is—?"

For the first tone since meeting the Squire of Gothos, Kirk grinned. "I am going to turn his lights off at their source, Mr Spock." Then he fell silent. As Trelane waltzed by them with Teresa, he spoke again with unusual loudness. "Nobody is to be too upset by what you see. I am addressing my own people. The actions of this being are those of an immature, unbalanced mind!"

Abruptly, Trelane stopped prancing. "I overheard that last remark. I'm afraid I'll have to dispense with you, Captain." As the arm began to lift, Kirk said, "You only heard part of it. I was just getting started, Trelane!"

The creature's eyes brightened with curiosity. "Ok?"

"Yes," Kirk said. "I want you to leave my crewmen alone! *And my crewwomen, too!*" He reached for Teresa, pulled her away from Trelane, and lifting her, set her down behind him. Then he wheeled to face her. "You're not to dance with him anymore! I don't like it!"

First, he snatched the diamond tiara from her hair. Then he reached for the bracelets, peeling them off her arm along with her white glove. Flushing, the girl cried, "Captain, please don't think…"

Trelane gave a chortle of pleasure. "Why, I believe the good captain is jealous of me!"

"Believe what you like," Kirk said. "Just keep your hands off her!"

Trelane was staring at him. "How curiously human," he said. "How wonderfully barbaric!"

Taut, no longer acting, Kirk said, "I've had enough of your attentions to her!"

"Of course you have. After all, it's the root of the matter, isn't it, Captain? We males fight for the attention, the admiration, the possession of women—"

Kirk struck him across the face with Teresa's glove. "If fighting is what you want, you'll have it!"

Trelane gave a leap of joy. "You mean—you are challenging me to a duel?" Eyes dancing, he cried, "This is even better than I'd planned. I shall not shirk an affair of honor!" Skipping like a lamb in spring, he ran over to the gleaming box that hung among the weapons displayed over the fireplace. He removed it, lifting its lid. "A matched set," he said. "A matched set exactly like the one that slew your heroic Alexander Hamilton."

Bowing, he presented the box to Kirk. On its velvet lining reposed two curve-handled, flintlock dueling pistols.

Trelane took one. He pointed it at Kirk's head. "Captain," he said, "it may momentarily interest you to know that I never miss my target."

He moved over to take up his position at one side of the room. As he checked the mechanism of his pistol, McCoy, Sulu and the others gathered in an anxious group behind Kirk. He waved them back, thinking, "I know what I'll have to report to the log. Weaponless, powerless, our only hope of escape with the *Enterprise* is playing his games with this retardate of Gothos." He looked up from the absurdity of the ancient dueling pistol. His adversary had a look of rapturous enchantment on his face.

“Fascinating!” he cried ecstatically. “I stand on a Field of Honor. I am party to an actual human duel!”

“Are you ready, Trelane?”

“Quite ready, Captain. We shall test each other’s courage—and then—"the voice thickened—"we shall see…”

Kirk started to lift his pistol when Trelane cried, “Wait! As the one challenged, I claim the right of the first shot”

“We shoot *together*,” Kirk said.

Trelane was querulous. “It’s *my* game—and *my* rules.” Raising his gun, he aimed it straight at Spock. “But if you need to be persuaded…”

When you were dealing with a moral idiot, it was morally idiotic to take heroic stands. “All right,” Kirk said. “You shoot first.”

“Captain—” Spock was pretesting. But Kirk had already lowered his pistol. And Trelane, craving the heroic limelight momentarily focused on Kirk, raised his gun above his head and fired a shot harmlessly into the ceiling.

He was so enraptured by the glory of the figure he cut in his own imagination that he couldn’t contain his pleasure. “And now, Captain—how do you say it?—my fate is in your hands.” He shut his eyes with a beatific smile; and tearing open his shirt front, exposed his chest to whatever shot, whatever Fate had in store for him.

What Fate had in store for him was surprise. Instead of sending a bullet into Trelane’s chest, Kirk sent one, smack! into the center of the mirror on the wall. The glass shattered. And explosively, from behind it, burst a tangle of electronic circuitry, mingled with broken grids and wire-disgorging cables. Something flashed, hissing viciously, spitting blue sparks.

Trelane screamed. He ran to the spark-showering mirror, screaming, “What have you done? What have you done?”

“The machine of power,” Spock said very quietly.

It burned out quickly. Above their heads, the rows of candles in the chandelier flickered and died. A grayish, bleak twilight crept into the room. In the grate, the heatless fire was extinct, its passing marked only by a puff of evil-smelling smoke.

Trelane shrieked at the sight of the suddenly dead room. “You’ve ruined everything!” He sank down on the harpsichord bench; and his elbows, leaned back against its keyboard, evoked a hideously discordant jangle, shrill, ear-splitting.

Beside Kirk, struggling with his communicator, De Salle said, "Captain, subspace interference is clearing…"

"Contact the ship!"

Trelane had partially recovered himself. Still torn between contempt for Kirk and admiration, the Squire of Gothos indulged himself in an objective comment. "The remarkable treachery of the human species," he said—and getting up, walked over to the wall bedecked with the blackened ruins of the mirror. Watching him, Kirk said, "Go on, Trelane! Look at it! It's over! Your power is blanked out! You're finished?"

For the first time, genuine feeling triumphed over the emotional theatricality of the Squire of Gothos. He looked somberly at Kirk. "You have earned my wrath," he said. "Go back to your ship! Go back to it! Then prepare. All of you, you are dead men… you in particular, Captain Kirk!"

He had begun to move toward the burnt space which had held the wall mirror. As he reached it, he was gone. Kirk, just a step behind him, was brought up against a blank wall. He stepped back from it, turning to his people. "Everyone! We're getting out of here —and *now!*"

His voice was hoarse as he spoke into his communicator. "This is the captain, *Enterprise!* Commence beaming us up! Make it maximum speed!"

Scott gave their beam-up maximum speed. Kirk left the Transporter Room for the bridge with the same variety of leg haste. In his chair, he quickly reached for the intercom. "Scotty, full power acceleration from orbit!"

"Full power, sir."

The ship leaped forward, and on the viewing screen the crescent-shaped bulk that was Gothos began to dwindle in size.

Kirk said, "Set course for Colony Beta 6, Mr Sulu."

"Laid in, sir."

"Warp Factor One at the earliest possible moment."

Sulu said, "Standing by to warp, sir."

Uhura, back with her panels, turned. "Shall I send a full report to Space Fleet Command, Captain?"

Kirk frowned. "Not yet. Not until we're well out of his range. Our beam might be traced."

Spock spoke from his computer post. "Can we know what his range is, sir?"

"We can make an educated guess. At this point—" Kirk had strode over to Spock's assortment of star maps and was directing a forefinger at a spot on one of them. "This is where we first detected the solar system." He was about to return to his chair when he noted Teresa, still wearing the panniered gown of flowered silk. His look of admiration roused her to the realization of its incongruity.

"Sir," she said, "may I take a moment to change, now that the ball is over?"

Kirk smiled at her. "You may—but you'll have to give up that highly becoming garment for scientific analysis, Yeoman Ross."

She flushed. And he tore his eyes away from the vision she made to look back at the viewing screen. Gothos had grown smaller and smaller. Even as he watched, it was lost to sight.

Uhura, the relaxation of her relief in her voice, said, "Still no sign of pursuit, sir. Instruments clear."

Sulu, turning his head, said, "Captain, we are about to warp"—and at the same moment De Salle gave a shout.

"Screen, sir! Large body ahead!"

Just a moment ago the screen had been empty. Kirk stared at its new inhabitant; and De Salle, jumping to his feet, yelled, "Collision course, sir!"

Tight-lipped, Kirk said, "Helm hard to port!"

The bridge crew staggered under the push by the sharp turn. All eyes were fixed on the screen where the crescent-shaped image loomed larger and larger. Then the *Enterprise* had veered away from it. A mutter came from the stunned De Salle. "That was the planet Gothos," he said.

Kirk whirled to Sulu. "Mr Sulu, have we been going in a circle?"

"No, sir! All instruments show on course…"

De Salle gave another yell. "It's Gothos again, Captain!"

The planet had once more appeared on the screen. Kirk barked the evasive order—and again people staggered under the centrifugal force of the ship's abrupt turn. The image of the planet, shrunken on the screen, suddenly enlarged once again. Without order, Sulu put the ship into a vertiginous turn-maneuver. As they came out of it, Spock said, "Cat and mouse game."

"With Trelane the cat," Kirk said tightly.

De Salle, his capacity for intense reaction exhausted, said, low-voiced, "There it is, sir—dead ahead…"

On the screen the planet showed red, wreathed by fiery mists. It seemed to boil, noxious, hideously ulcerous, with its eruptive skin. Kirk, his jaw set, spoke, "Ninety degrees starboard, Mr Sulu!"

But though Sulu moved his helm controls, the planet held its place on the screen, always increasing its size.

"We're turning, Captain," Sulu cried. "We're turning—but we're not veering away from it!"

Kirk shouted. "Ninety subport, Mr Sulu. Adjust!"

What was happening on the screen continued to happen on it. Desperate, Sulu cried, "A complete turn, sir—and we're still accelerating toward the planet!"

Dry as dust, Spock said, "Or it toward us."

Kirk was staring in silence at the screen. "That's *it!*" he said. He wheeled his chair around. "We will decelerate into orbit! We will return to orbit! Prepare the Transporter Room!"

McCoy spoke for the first time. "You're not going down there, Captain! You can't do it, Jim!"

Kirk got up. "I *am* going down, Doctor McCoy. And *I am* going to delight my eyes again with the sight of our whimsical General Trelane. And if it takes wringing his neck to make him let my ship go…" He was at the bridge elevator. "Mr Spock, stand by communicators. If you receive no message from me in one hour, leave this vicinity. At once. Without any sentimental turning back for me."

There was comfort in Spock's quiet nod. No heroics, no weakening sympathy. Just the perception of a reality, a necessity clear to each of them. Spock, his friend.

On a wall in Trelane's drawing room was the shadow of a gallows, dark, implicating. Kirk ignored it. For otherwise, the room was unchanged. Logs burned in the fireplace. The light of candles was refracted from the crystals of its chandelier. The mirror on the wall had been restored, its glass now protected by a heavy wire-mesh shield.

A heavily portentous voice said, "The prisoner may approach the bench."

It was Trelane. He had doffed his military glories for the graver garb of Law's upholders. He wore the white peri-wig of England's servants of jurisprudence, the black silk robes of a high court judge. He was writing something with a goose-quill pen on some

parchment-looking document. The gallows noose—shadow or substance?—seemed to droop over Kirk.

"Trelane…!" Kirk said.

Nobody can be so solemn as an idiot. And Trelane, an essential idiot, was very solemn. Solemn and dangerous. In a voice that dripped with unction, he said, "Any attempt at demonstrations will weigh against you with the court. And this time my instrumentality is unbreakable, Captain Kirk."

"My neck seems to be threatened by your court, Trelane. And your neck—is it so very safe?"

A flicker of irritation passed over the heavy-jowled face.

"The absurdity of inferior beings!" said Trelane. He picked up the parchment. "And now, Captain James Kirk, you stand accused of the high crimes of treason, of conspiracy, of attempt to foment insurrection." His periwig must have itched him for he pushed it up, giving himself the look of a slightly drunken, white-haired Silenus. "How do you plead?" he said.

"I haven't come here to plead in your 'court,' Trelane.."

The Squire of Gothos sat back, tapping his quill pen against his table. "I must warn you that anything you say has already been taken down in evidence against you."

It was like *Alice in Wonderland*. It was like Looking-Glass Land, where what seems to be is not and what is not appears to be the fact. Reaching for sanity, Kirk said, "I came here for one purpose. I want my ship returned to me."

"Irrelevant," Trelane said, giving his periwig an irritated push.

"We made you angry by our will to survive. Is that it?" Kirk said.

Trelane drew a tremulous finger across his upper lip. "Irrelevant," he said. "A comment entirely uncalled for."

"Sure, *that's it*," Kirk retorted. "Then vent your anger on me alone! I was the one who led the others—and I was the one who shot out your mirror machine…"

For the first time, rage seemed to overwhelm vanity in Trelane. His voice thickened. "And did you really think I wouldn't have more mediums of instrumentality at my command?"

"I took that chance. And I'll accept the price of chancing wrong —"

Trelane rose. "Then you do admit the charges. This court has no choice in fixing punishment. You will hang by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead. Have you any last request?"

Kirk gave a great shout of laughter. "If you think I'm going to stick my head in that noose…"

Trelane's hand moved—and Kirk found himself standing under the gallows, its noose, real, heavy, rough around his throat. Trelane, reaching for a black executioner's mask, regarded him plaintively. "This really is becoming tiresome. It's much too easy."

Kirk freed himself from the noose. "Easy!" he yelled. "That's your whole problem, Trelane! Everything comes too easy to you! You don't ever have to *think!* So you lose opportunities. You're enjoying your sense of power right now—but the chance to experience something really unique? You're wasting it! Where's the sport in a simple hanging? In making a rope do your killing for you?"

"Sport?" Trelane echoed. Suddenly his face cleared. He clapped his hands. "Oh, I am intrigued! Go on, Captain! What do you suggest?"

"A personal conflict between us… with the stakes a human life—*mine!*"

"What an inspired idea! We need something more fanciful—a truly royal hunt, maybe." He gestured toward the windows. "You go out and hide from me. In the forest… anywhere you like… and I will seek you out with—*this!*" He wrenched a sword from the scabbard in front of him, brandishing it ferociously. "How does that strike you, Captain? Truly sporting?"

"Yes," Kirk said. "But you must make the game worth my while. While we play it, free my ship."

Trelane sniffed. "Always back to your ship. Oh, very well. If it will lend spice to the pursuit…"

Kirk broke into a run, making a dash for a window. He brought up in a copse of vividly green bushes. With desperate haste, he flipped open his communicator. "*Enterprise! Enterprise*, can you hear me? Get the ship away fast! Fast as you can! I'll try to gain you the time you need—"

He stopped. Trelane had burst through the copse, slashing at leaves with his sword. "Ah, ha!" he screamed, "I see you!" But Kirk, diving, had rolled down the slant of a small knoll. Trelane's sword flashed over his head—and in his frantic scramble for the shelter of a heavy-trunked tree, he dropped his communicator.

"You must try harder, Captain!" The sword-point pricked Kirk's arm. He rose from his crouch behind the tree to tear a branch away from it. It struck straight and true on Trelane's sword arm.

The weapon flew out of his hand; and Kirk, grabbing it up, slashed at Trelane with all his two-handed strength.

It cut right through him, leaving no sign of wound or of blood. Horrified, Kirk stared—but Trelane, still playing the role of gallant sportsman, merely said, "*Touché*, Captain. I confess you've scored first. But after all, I've never played this game before…"

He vanished. Kirk, still shaking, ducked behind a screen of brush. Under it, he saw the gleaming metal of his dropped communicator. "*Enterprise…!*"

"En garde!"

Trelane had reappeared, sword lifted. Barely in time, Kirk broke for cover behind a hedge. Then, stooping, he burst out of its shelter to make for the door between the two stone griffins.

"Tallyho!"

The fatuous Squire of Gothos had spotted him. Kirk wheeled to his right—and a stone wall erected itself before him. He whirled to his left; and another blocked his way. Trapped, he backed up against the door of Trelane Hall; and its proprietor, triumph giving his face a look of gorged repletion, said, "Ah, Captain, you made a noble fight of it!" A dribble of saliva issued from the thick lips. "But you are beaten. Down, Captain. Down to me on your knees."

Kirk spoke, the sword against his throat. "You have won nothing."

"I have! I could run you through! I order you to your knees. I order it!" Trelane lunged with his sword; but Kirk, seizing it, tore it out of his hand; and in one snap over his knee, broke it. He tossed the pieces aside.

"You broke it!" Trelane wailed. "You broke my sword! But I won't have it. I'll blast you out of existence with a wave of my hand!"

Kirk struck him sharply across the face; and Trelane, shrieking, "I'll fix you for that!" squeezed the trigger of the phaser that had suddenly appeared in his hand. A murderously disintegrating ray darted from its muzzle—and at the same moment a woman's voice called "Trelane!"

"No! No!" Trelane howled, running down the steps of his Hall's entrance. Two globes of light hung in the air at their foot. "No! Go away!" he yelled. "You said I could have this planet for my own!" The spheres of light, one slightly smaller than the other, sparkled with an iridescence of rainbow colors.

Trelane was shouting at them. "You always stop me just when I'm having fun!"

"If you cannot take proper care of your pets, you cannot have any pets," said the female voice.

Trelane burst into tears. "But you saw! I was winning! I would have won. I would, I would, I would." But even as he wept, he was dwindling, a shape losing substance, collapsing in on itself. Then he was only an emptiness in the air.

Kirk looked skyward as though seeking an explanation of the inexplicable. "Where are you?" he cried. "Who is Trelane and who are you?"

"You must forgive our child," said the woman's voice. "The fault is ours for overindulging him. He will be punished."

A stern male voice spoke. "We would not have let him intercept you had we realized your vulnerability. Forgive us, Captain. We will maintain your life-support conditions while you return to your ship. Please accept our apologies."

Kirk flung out his hands toward the two spheres. "Can't you tell me…?" Then, like Trelane, they were gone. After a long moment, he broke out his communicator. "Captain to *Enterprise*. Captain calling the *Enterprise*…"

He shut his eyes at the sound—the familiar sound of Spock's voice. "Captain, we are receiving you—"

Kirk gave a last look around him at Trelane's domain—its greenery, the two stone griffins, the appalling solitude of its loneliness in the midst of the Gothos hell. "Beam me up," he said. "Mr Spock, we're free to leave here."

It was a singularly thoughtful Kirk who gave the order for normal approach procedures to Colony Beta 6. He was glad when Spock left his station to come to the command chair. Somehow he'd known that Spock alone could reconcile him to the paradoxes of his recent encounter with the Squire of Gothos.

"I am entering," Spock said, "our recent… uh… interesting experience into the library computer banks, Captain. But I am puzzled."

"Puzzled—you, Mr Spock?" For a moment the old quizzicalness played across Kirk's face. "I am surprised. I am amazed that you admit it. Explanation, please…"

Spock said, "General, or Squire Trelane, Captain. How do we describe him? Pure mentality? A force of intellect? Embodied energy? Superbeing? He must be classified, sir."

Kirk stared unseeingly at his board. "Of course, Mr Spock. Certainly, he must be classified. Everything must be classified—or where would we be?"

"But I am somewhat at a loss…" Spock said.

"A god of war, Mr Spock?"

"I hardly think…"

"Or… a small boy, Mr Spock. And a very naughty one at that."

"It will make a strange entry in the library banks, sir."

"He was a very strange small boy. But on the other hand, he probably was doing things comparable, in their way, to the same mischievous pranks you played when you were a boy."

"Mischievous pranks, Captain?"

"Dipping little girls' curls in inkwells… stealing apples… tying cans on a dog's—" He broke off, sensing Spock's growing dismay. Where, in the universe, was another Spock to be found—the one you could trust to the end for reasons that had no relation to the ordinary human ones? Kirk grinned. "Excuse me, Mr Spock. I should have known better. You were never a mischievous small boy."

"As you say, Captain," Spock said.

Back at his station, he cocked a puzzled eyebrow at Kirk. Kirk smiled at him. Spock, lifting the other eyebrow, returned to his computer. And the *Enterprise*, course set, oblivious of the manifold temptations of deep space, sped on to its assignation with Colony Beta 6.

ARENA

(Gene L Coon)

Captain James Kirk of the USS *Enterprise* was the absolute master of the largest and most modern vessel in the Starfleet Service, of all the complex apparatus and weaponry aboard her, and of the manifold talents of 430 highly trained crewmen.

And at the moment, he was stranded on a nearly barren artificial asteroid, location unknown, facing a tyrannosaur-like creature whose survival depended upon its killing Kirk, and equipped with absolutely nothing except a small translator-recorder useless as a weapon.

The situation had developed with bewildering rapidity. Originally, the *Enterprise* had received a call from the Earth outpost on Cestus Three, part of a planetary system on the very edge of an unexplored quadrant of the galaxy. The base commandant, an old soldier named Travers, had asked Kirk to beam down with the tactical staff of the *Enterprise*; and since things were quiet in this sector of space and Travers was famous in the Service for setting a good table, all six men had accepted cheerfully.

But the invitation had been a trap—a prerecorded trap. They had found the settlement in smoking ruins, the personnel dead. Furthermore, within minutes after its arrival the landing party was also under attack—and so was the *Enterprise*.

Evidently, the enemy, whoever he was, did not have the transporter and had no idea of its capabilities; after five minutes' inconclusive exchange of shots, the landing party was whisked away clean. The enemy ship broke off the engagement and fled, at fantastically high acceleration.

Kirk had no intention of letting it get away, however. It seemed obvious that any attempt to ambush the *Enterprise's* tactical staff and captain, and then to destroy the starship itself, could only be a prelude to a full-scale invasion. Furthermore, the unknown enemy was well armed—the damage its ship had suffered thus far had been minor, despite its flight—and peculiarly ruthless, as witness its having wiped out 512 helpless people at an inoffensive scientific

outpost simply to bait its trap. As Science Officer Spock had pointed out, that ship could not be allowed to reach its home base; presumably, as long as that unknown world was kept in the dark about Federation strength, it would hold off its next attack—thus buying precious time for a defense buildup.

The enemy seemed equally anxious to avoid leading the *Enterprise* to its home planet. It took complex evasive action, again at incredibly high speed; the *Enterprise* had difficulty in closing with her even at warp eight, two factors above maximum safe speed.

And then, suddenly, everything stopped.

It was absolutely impossible, but it happened. At one moment, both vessels were flashing through subspace at over a hundred times the speed of light—and in the next, both were, floating in normal space, motionless relative to a small, nearby solar system, engines inoperative, all weapons dead.

"Report!" Kirk snapped.

But there was no damage, nothing abnormal—except that the *Enterprise* could neither move nor fight, nor, apparently, could the enemy.

"We're being scanned, sir," Communications Officer Uhura said.

"From the alien ship?"

"No, sir," she said. "From that solar system ahead. Nothing hostile—no tractors or weapon sensors, just scanners."

"Stopping us like this might be considered hostile," Kirk said drily.

"Getting something else, Captain—a modulation of the main frequency?"

Abruptly, the lights dimmed and there was a low hum from the main viewing screen. The starry scene from outside promptly dissolved into a twisting, confused mass of color and lines. At the same time a humanoid voice, strong and yet somehow youthful, shook the air of the bridge. The voice said: "We are the Metrons."

Kirk and Spock exchanged speculative glances. Then the Science Officer said, quite composedly: "How do you do?"

The voice's owner paid no apparent attention. It continued: "You are one of two craft that have come into our space on a mission of violence. This is not permissible. Our analysis further shows that your violent tendencies are inherent. Hence we will resolve your conflict in the way most suited to your natures. Captain James Kirk!"

"This is Captain Kirk," Kirk said, after a moment's hesitation.

"We have prepared a planetoid with a suitable atmosphere, temperature and gravity. You will be taken there, as will the captain of the Gorn ship that you have been pursuing. You and your opponent will be provided with a translator-recorder. You can keep a record, or communicate with each other, should you feel the need. But not with your ships. You will each be totally alone, and will settle your dispute alone."

"Just what makes you think you can interfere?" Kirk began angrily.

"It is you who are doing the interfering. We are simply putting a stop to it—within your own violent frame of reference. The place we have prepared for you contains sufficient resources for either of you to construct weapons lethal to the other. The winner of the ordeal will be permitted to go on his way unharmed. The loser, along with his ship, will be destroyed in the interests of peace. The contest will be one of ingenuity against ingenuity, brute strength against brute strength. The outcome will be final."

With that, silently, the ship around Kirk vanished.

The first thing he saw was the Gorn. It was a biped, a reptile, a lizard that walked like a man. It stood about six feet four, with tremendous musculature, dully gleaming skin, a ridge of hard plate running down its back, and a strong, thick tail. The tail did not look prehensile; rather, it seemed to be a balancing organ, suggesting that the creature could run very fast indeed if it wished. The head was equipped with two tiny earholes and a wide mouth full of sharp teeth.

This, then, was the enemy, the raider, the destroyer of Cestus Three. It was wearing a garment like a short robe, belted; at the belt hung a small electronic device. It wore no shoes; clawed feet dug deeply into the ground, indicating considerable weight. Shooting a wary glance down at himself, Kirk discovered that his own clothing and equipment were identical.

Kirk and the Gorn stared at each other. All around them was a rocky, barren terrain, with a peculiar gray-green sky and occasional clumps of vegetation, some of it fairly tall, but none of it familiar. The air was cold and dry.

Kirk wondered if the Gorn was as uncomfortable as he was. Probably, but for different reasons. The meddling Metrons would surely have allowed neither of them an advantage in environment;

after all, this planetoid was artificial—deliberately constructed to be an arena for a trial of champions, and for nothing else.

The Gorn moved. It was closing in on Kirk. It looked quite capable of killing him with its bare hands. Kirk moved sidewise, warily.

The Gorn did not appear to want to take any chances. As it too circled, it passed close to a gnarled object like a small tree, perhaps eight to ten inches through the trunk, and about ten feet high. With a quick look at Kirk, the Gorn hissed softly, reached out, and broke off a thick branch. The move seemed to cost it very little effort, whereas Kirk doubted that he could have done it at all.

Then, suddenly, holding the branch aloft like a club, the Gorn was charging him.

Kirk sprang aside barely in time. As the Gorn passed, somewhat off-balance, Kirk swung a killing blow into its midriff. The impact nearly broke his hand, but it seemed to have no other effect. The club lashed back, knocking Kirk sprawling against the rocks.

The Gorn wheeled around, clumsily but swiftly, and pounced. Kirk, dazed, tried to counter with a forearm blow to the throat, but it was like hitting an elephant. Then the creature was gripping him like a grizzly. Kirk's arm just managed to keep the teeth away, but that grip was going to break his back.

Freeing his arms with a sudden twist, Kirk boxed the Gorn's earholes with cupped hands. The Gorn screamed and staggered back, shaking its huge head. Springing to his feet, Kirk picked up a boulder as big as his head and hurled it at the Gorn with all his strength.

It struck the Gorn fair on the chest. The creature lurched slightly, but it did not seem to be hurt. Hissing shrilly, it bent to pick up a boulder of its own. The thing must have weighed a thousand pounds, but the Gorn got it aloft in one titanic jerk.

Kirk ran.

The rock hit behind him with an explosive crack, and flying splinters cut into the calf of one leg like shrapnel. Still hobbling as fast as he could, Kirk looked back over his shoulder.

The Gorn was not following. Instead, it was heaving up another rock. Then, as if realizing that Kirk was now out of range, it let the huge mass drop. It seemed to be grinning, although as far as Kirk had been able to see, it never wore any other expression.

Kirk looked around, panting. He seemed to be in a gully, though there was no sign that water had ever run in it—after all, there hadn't even been such a planet many hours ago. There were rocks

everywhere, some of them brilliantly colored, and an occasional outcropping of quartzlike crystals. Here and there were patches of scrubby, tough-looking brush, some of it resembling cacti, some mesquite, and even an occasional stand of a large, bamboolike growth. There was nothing that looked as though it could possibly be converted into a weapon, no matter what the Metron had said.

Kirk sat down, rubbing his injured leg but taking great care to watch the now-distant Gorn, and looked over the device at his belt. It looked quite like a tricorder, but both smaller and simpler—though simpler, at least, it doubtless was not. Kirk turned it on with the obvious switch.

"Calling the *Enterprise*. Captain James Kirk calling the *Enterprise*."

For a moment, there was no answer. Then the instrument said, in good but rather stilted English: "You forget, Captain. We cannot reach our ships. We are alone here, you and I—just one against the other."

He looked back the way he had come. Sure enough, the Gorn seemed to be speaking behind one raised hand.

Kirk had not, of course, forgotten that he had been told he could not raise the *Enterprise*; he had simply wanted to test the statement. What he had forgotten was that the small instrument had been said to be a translator, as well as a recorder. He would have to be very careful not to mutter to himself after this.

After a moment, he said tentatively, "Look here, Gorn, this is insane. Can't we patch up some kind of truce?"

"Out of the question," the translator said promptly. "That would result only in our staying here until we starved. I cannot speak for you, but I see no water here, nor anything I could eat—with the possible exception of you."

"Neither do I," Kirk admitted.

"Then let us not waste time in sentimental hopes. The rules are what they are: One of us must kill the other."

Kirk hung the device back on his belt. The Gorn was right, and that was most definitely that.

He scrambled over to look at the bamboolike stuff. Each stalk was perhaps three to four inches in diameter—and, as he discovered by trying to break a section loose, it was as hard as iron. Hitting it with a rock even produced a distinctly metallic clank. Perhaps it picked up iron from the soil, as horsetails pick up calcium oxalate, or some prairie grasses pick up selenium. Useless.

He moved on up the gully, which got steadily deeper; he lost sight of the Gorn almost at once. Well, the risk had to be taken; staying where he was had gotten him nowhere.

Earthen banks, rather like bluish clay, reared on both sides of him now. One was steep, but the slope of the other was gentle enough to permit him to clamber up it if he had to.

Sticking out of the clay were the pyramidal points of a number of large crystals. Hopefully, Kirk pried one of them out. It was about the size of a hen's egg, and glittered brilliantly even under this sunless sky. The shape and the brilliancy were unmistakable: It was a diamond, and one that would have made the Kohinoor look like a mail-order zircon. And not only were there more of them imbedded in the clay, but the floor of the gully, he now saw, was a litter of them, in all sizes down, to fine sand.

An incredible fortune—and again, utterly useless. None of the gems was sharp enough to be used as a weapon point, and he had no way to cut them. Their only use was to show that this planet was indeed an artificial construction—but Kirk had never doubted that, anyhow. He would have traded the whole wealth of them for a hand phaser, or even a medieval crossbow and a quiver of bolts for it.

The gully turned just ahead. Throwing the diamond away, Kirk went around the bend. The Metron had said that there were the raw materials of weapons here somewhere, if only he—

At the next step, his ankle struck a taut vine, and he went sprawling. At the same moment there was a sharp *crack!* as of wood splitting, and then one whole side of the gully seemed to be roaring down upon him.

He rolled frantically in the other direction, but not fast enough to prevent one rock from slamming into his chest. He felt a rib break. Staggering to his feet, he ran for the nearest cover, a sculptured overhang almost deep enough in back to be called a cave. There he stopped, breathing hard and nursing his rib cage—his whole body seemed to be one enormous bruise—and inspected the snare that had almost killed him through the gradually settling dust.

It was very simple and highly ingenious: a length of stretched vine to serve as a trigger, a broken branch, a heap of carefully stacked boulders that had been freed when the branch had been pulled loose.

Above him, Kirk heard the tick of large claws on rock, and then a sharp hiss of what could only have been disappointment. Kirk grinned mirthlessly. It had been near enough. He peered cautiously out of his hole and upward, just in time to see the Gorn

on the lip of the gully on the other side, moving away. The creature was carrying something long and shiny in one hand. Kirk could not tell exactly what it was, but the fact that the Gorn had a torn scrap of his tunic wrapped around that hand was clue enough. It was a daggerlike blade, evidently chipped out of obsidian glass.

Then the creature was gone, but Kirk did not feel the least bit reassured. So far, the Gorn was way ahead, not only on strength, but on ingenuity. First a snare—now a dagger.

Well, then, back to the Stone Age with a vengeance. If Kirk could find a flint point, another length of vine, a sufficiently long stick, he might make a spear. That would give him the advantage of reach against the Gorn's dagger. On the other hand, would a spear penetrate that hide? There was only one way to find out.

A sufficiently large chip of flint, however, obstinately failed to turn up. All that was visible on the floor of the overhang was a wash of brilliant yellow powder.

The stuff looked familiar, and on a hunch, Kirk picked up a small handful of it and breathed on it. It gave out the faint crackle characteristic of flowers of sulfur when moistened.

Kirk grimaced. What a maddening planet. Sand of high-purity sulfur, veritable beaches of diamonds, iron-concentrating bamboos; and at the back of the cave here, outcroppings of rocks covered with a yellowish-white effluvium, like saltpeter. The only way he could make any sort of weapon out of a mélange like that would be with a smelter and a forge.

Wait a minute. Just a minute, now. There was something at the back of his mind—something very ancient?

With a gulp of hope, he ran back toward the growth of bamboo-like stuff.

With a sharp rock, he managed to break off about a three-foot length of one tube, at one of its joints. The tube was closed at one end, open at the other. Ideal.

Now, the diamonds. He took up only the smallest, the most sandlike, measuring them by handfuls into the tube. He could only hope that his memory of the proportions—seventy-five, fifteen, ten—was correct; in any event, he could only approximate the measures under these conditions. Now, one of the large egg-shaped diamonds; this he put into his mouth, since the tunic did not come equipped with pockets.

Back up the gully, down and around the bend to the overhang. Into the tube went sulfur, saltpeter. Covering the end, he shook

the tube until a little of the mixture poured out into his palm showed an even color, though certainly not the color it should have been.

A stone point penetrated the bamboo at the base, though it was hard work. A bit of torn tunic for a patch, and ram it all home with a stick. Then the egg-shaped diamond; then another patch, and ram again. Finally, a piece of flint; it did not have to be large, not any more.

"Captain," the translator at his belt said. He did not answer.

"Captain, be reasonable," the translator said. "Hiding will do you no good. If it is a matter of competitive starvation, I think my endurance is greater than yours. Why not come out, and die like a warrior?"

Kirk ignored it. Shredding another piece of cloth from the tunic, he began to strike the piece of flint over it, using the translator—at last it had a use!—as the steel. Sparks flew, but the cloth would not catch. If it was non-inflammable.

"You cannot destroy me," the translator said. "Let us be done with it. I shall be merciful and quick."

"Like you were at Cestus Three?" Kirk said.

"You were intruding," the translator said. "You established an outpost in our space. Naturally we destroyed it"

Kirk did not stop striking sparks, but he was at the same time thoughtful. What the Gorn said was perhaps reasonable, from its point of view. Very little was known about that arm of the galaxy; perhaps the Gorn had a right to regard it as theirs—and to be alarmed at the setting up of a base there, and by the advent of a ship the size of the *Enterprise*. Nevertheless?

Smoke rose from the shredded cloth. He raised it to his lips, blowing gently. It was catching.

"All right, Gorn," he told the translator. "Come and get me if you think you can. I'm under the overhang just past where you set your snare."

There was a sharp hiss, and then the clear sound of the Gorn's claws, coming at a run up the gully. Kirk had miscalculated. The creature was closer than he had thought—and faster. Frantically he struggled to align the clumsy bamboo tube.

The Gorn leapt into view, its obsidian knife raised. Kirk slapped the burning piece of clothes against the touchhole, and the makeshift cannon went off with a splintering roar. The concussion knocked Kirk down; the semicave was filled with acrid smoke.

He groped to his feet again. As the smoke cleared, he saw the Gorn, slumped against the other wall of the gully. The diamond egg had smashed its right shoulder; but it was bleeding from half a dozen other places too, where diamond chips had flown out of the cannon instead of igniting.

The knife lay between them. Leaping forward, Kirk snatched it up, hurled himself on the downed alien. The knife's point found one of the wounds.

"Now," Kirk said hoarsely, "now let's see how tough your hide is!"

The Gorn did not answer. Though conscious, it seemed to be in shock. It was all over. All Kirk had to do was shove.

He could not do it. He rose, slowly.

"No," he said. "We're in the same pickle. You're trying to save your ship, the same as I am. I won't kill, you for that."

Suddenly furious, Kirk looked up at the greenish, overcast sky.

"Do you hear?" he shouted. "I won't kill him! You'll have to get your entertainment someplace else!"

There was a long pause. Kirk stared down at the wounded alien; the Gorn stared back. Its translator had been shattered by the impact; it could not know what Kirk had said. But it did not seem to be afraid.

Then it vanished.

Kirk sat down, dejected and suddenly, utterly weary. Right or wrong, he had lost his opportunity now. The Metron had snatched the Gorn away.

Then there was a humming, much like that he had heard so long ago aboard ship, when the screen had been scrambled. He turned.

A figure was materializing under the overhang. It was not very formidable—certainly nothing so ominous, so awe-inspiring as its voice had suggested. Also, it was very beautiful. It looked like a boy of perhaps eighteen.

"You're a Metron," Kirk said listlessly.

"True," said the figure. "And you have surprised us, Captain."

"How?" Kirk said, not much interested. "By winning?"

"No. We had no preconceptions as to which of you would win. You surprised us by refusing to kill, although you had pursued the Gorn craft into our space with the intention of destroying it."

"That was different," Kirk said. "That was necessary."

"Perhaps it was. It is a new thought. Under the circumstances, it is only fair to tell you that we lied to you."

"In what way?"

"We said that the ship of the loser of this personal combat would be destroyed," said the Metron. "After all, it would be the winner—the stronger, the more resourceful race—who would pose the greatest threat to us. It was the winner we planned to destroy."

Kirk lurched to his feet. "Not my ship," he said dangerously.

"No, Captain. We have changed our minds. By sparing your helpless enemy—who would surely have killed you in like circumstances—you demonstrated the advanced trait of mercy. This we hardly expected—and it leaves us with no clear winner."

"What did you do with the Gorn, then?"

"We sent him back to his ship. And in your case, we misinterpreted your motives. You sincerely believed that you would be destroying the Gorn ship to keep the peace, not break it. If you like, we shall destroy it for you."

"No!" Kirk said hastily. "That's not necessary. It was a? a misunderstanding. Now that we've made contact, we'll be able to talk to the Gorn—reach an agreement."

"Very good," said the Metron. "Perhaps we too shall meet again—in a few thousand years. In any event, there is hope for you."

And abruptly, the *Enterprise* sprang into being around Kirk.

Turmoil broke out on the bridge. Ship's Surgeon McCoy was the first to reach Kirk's side.

"Jim! Are you all right?"

"To be quite honest with you," Kirk said dazedly, "I don't know. I just wish the world would stop popping in and out at me."

"I gather you won," Spock said. "How did you do it?"

"Yes? I guess so. I'm not quite sure. I thought I did it by reinventing gunpowder—with diamond dust for charcoal. But the Metrons say I won by being a sucker. I don't know which explanation is truer. All the Metrons would tell me is that we're a most promising species—as predators go."

"I could not have put the matter more neatly myself," Spock said. "But, Captain, I would be interested to know what it is you're talking about—when you feel ready, of course."

“Yes, indeed,” Kirk said. “In the meantime, posts, everybody. It’s time we got back down to business. And, Mr Spock, about that explanation?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I suggest you raise the question again, in, say, a few thousand years.”

“Yes, sir.”

And the odd thing about Spock, the captain reflected, was that he *would* wait that long too, if only he could figure out a way to live through it—and when the time had all passed, Spock would remember to ask the question again.

Kirk hoped he would have an answer.

THE ALTERNATIVE FACTOR

(Don Ingalls)

The planet offered such routine readings to the *Enterprise* sensors that Kirk ordered a course laid in for the nearest Star Base. "We can be on our way," he was telling the helmsman when Spock lifted his head from his computer. He said, "Captain, there is—"

He never completed his sentence. The *Enterprise* heaved in a gigantic lurch. A deafening grinding sound hammered at its hull—and the ship went transparent. From where he'd been flung, Kirk could see the stars shining through it. Then static crashed insanely as though the universe itself were wrenching in torment. Abruptly, stillness came. The ship steadied. The vast convulsion was over.

Bruised people, sprawled on the deck, began to edge cautiously back to their bridge stations. Kirk hauled himself back to his feet. "What in the name of—Mr Spock!"

Spock was already back at his computer. "Captain, this is incredible! I read—"

Again the mighty paroxysm interrupted him. There came the ship's headlong plunge, the grinding roar, it's appalling transparency. Kirk struggled once more to his feet and ran, ashen-faced, to Spock's station. "What is it?" he shouted.

"What my readings say is totally unbelievable, sir. Twice—for a split second each time—everything within range of our instruments seemed on the verge of winking out!"

Still shaken, Kirk said, "Mr Spock! I want facts! Not poetry!"

"I have given you facts, Captain. The entire magnetic field in this solar system simply blinked. That planet below us, whose mass I was measuring, attained zero gravity."

Kirk stared at him. "But that's impossible! What you are describing is… why, it's—"

"Nonexistence, Captain," Spock said.

Mingled horror and awe chilled Kirk. He heard Uhura speak. "There's a standard general-alert signal from Star Fleet Command, Captain!"

He raced for his mike. "This is the Captain speaking. All stations to immediate alert status. Stand by…"

Spock looked over at him. "Scanners now report a life object on the planet surface, sir."

"But only five minutes ago you made a complete life survey of it! What's changed?"

"This life reading only began to appear at approximately the same moment that the shock phenomena subsided."

And this was the routine planet that concealed no surprises! Kirk drew a deep breath. "What is its physical make-up?"

"A living being. Body temperature, 98.1 Fahrenheit. Mass… electrical impulses… it is apparently human, Captain."

"And its appearance coincided with your cosmic 'wink-out'?"

"Almost to the second."

"Explanation?"

"None, Captain."

"Could this being present a danger to the ship?"

"Possible… quite possible, sir."

Kirk was at the elevator. "Lieutenant Uhura, notify Security to have a detachment, armed and ready, to beam down with us. Stay hooked on to us. Let's go, Mr Spock. If any word from Star Fleet Command comes through, pipe it down at once. Communications priority one."

"Aye, sir."

For a planet capable of such violent mood changes, it was extraordinarily Earth-like. It was arid, hot and dry, the terrain where the landing group materialized resembling one of Earth's desert expanses. When Spock, studying his tricorder, pointed to the left, they moved off. Almost at once they met up with huge, tumbled boulders of granite, the passageways among then littered with rocky debris. They were edging through one of the defiles when they saw it.

At the base of a cliff lay a cone-shaped craft. It was like no spaceship any of them had ever seen. Its hull was studded with buttons connected to a mesh of coiling electronic circuits. Nothing moved around it. Its wedge-like door was open. Spock stood to one side as Kirk peered inside it. Its interior was a mass of complex instrumentation, shining wirings, tubes of unrecognizable

purple metal, parabolic reflectors. There was what appeared to be a control panel. A chair.

Kirk emerged, his face puzzled. "I've never seen anything like it. Have a look, Mr Spock…"

Spock was stepping through the door when the voice spoke. "You came! Thank God! There's still time!"

Everyone whirled, phasers out. Kirk looked up. On the cliff above them stood a man. He wore a ripped and disheveled jumper suit. He was a big man, but his face had been badly battered. A dark bruise had swollen his jaw. A husky man, but his broad shoulders sagged with an unutterable weariness. "It's not too late!" he cried down to them. "We can still stop him!" He extended his hands in appeal. "But I… I need your help… please… help me…"

He reeled, clutching at his throat. Then his knees buckled—and he tumbled, headlong, from the cliff.

Kirk and Spock ran to him. His body lay unmoving but massive physical power was still latent in it. Who was he? What were he and his spacecraft doing on this "routine" planet?

But McCoy would permit no questions. He shook his head over the bed in Sickbay, where the injured castaway had been placed. "It's going to be touch and go, Jim. Heartbeat practically nonexistent. What happened down there?"

"I don't know. He fell from a cliff. He'd been saying something about needing our help… and he just crumpled."

McCoy looked up from his diagnostic tricorder. "No wonder. After the beating he's taken."

"He was beaten?"

"I don't know what else could have caused his injuries."

"Bones," Kirk said, "that is a dead, lifeless, arid planet down there… no sign of living beings. Who could have attacked him?"

McCoy was frowning at his tricorder. "He's the only one who can answer that—if he lives…"

They both turned at the sound of Uhura's voice on the intercom. "Captain. Standby notice just in from Star Fleet Command. Red Two message about to come in."

"I'm on my way." At the door he said, "Keep me posted, Bones."

Chemist Charlene Masters met him at the bridge elevator door. "Here's my report on the dilithium crystals, sir. Whatever that

phenomenon was, it drained almost all of our crystals' power. It could mean trouble."

"You have a talent for understatement, Lieutenant. Without full crystal power, our orbit will begin to decay in ten hours. Reamplify immediately."

"Aye, sir."

He handed the report back to her and crossed to Spock's station. "Any further magnetic disturbance, Mr Spock?"

"Negative, Captain. Scanners indicate situation normal."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing, sir. And most illogical… an effect of that proportion incapable of explanation by any established physical laws I'm aware of." He paused. "I have ascertained one fact. Though the effect, whatever it was, was unquestionably widespread, it was strongest on the planet below us."

"Keep checking."

"Yes, Captain."

Uhura spoke. "Captain. Message coming in from Star Fleet Command. And the code, sir, it's Code Factor One."

The anxiety in her face reflected Kirk's sense of personal shock. Very seldom indeed did Star Fleet resort to Code Factor One to transmit a message. "Repeat," he told Uhura.

She said heavily, "It *is* Code Factor One, sir."

"Combat status!" Kirk shouted to Spock. He hit his communicator button. "All hands! This is the Captain. Battle stations! This is not a drill! Lieutenant Uhura, the main screen!"

"Aye, sir."

Sirens were shrieking as Kirk rushed to his command position. Over the noise his communicator beeped. It was McCoy. "About our patient, Jim—"

"Quickly, Bones!"

"He'll make it. He'll be flat on his back for at least a month. He's weak as a kitten but he'll pull through."

"Thank you, Bones. I'll be down to talk to him later. The message, Lieutenant Uhura…"

The strong face of Commodore Barstow came into focus on the screen.

"Kirk here, sir. *Enterprise* standing by."

The official voice spoke. "You're aware, Captain, of that effect that occurred an hour ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"You may not be aware of its scope. It was felt in every quadrant of the galaxy… and far beyond. Complete disruption of normal magnetic and gravimetric fields. Time warp distortion. Impossible radiation variations—and all of them centering in the area you are now patrolling. The question is… are they natural phenomena—or are they mechanically created? And if they are… by whom? For what purpose? Your guess, Captain…"

"My best guess, sir, is… because of the severity of the phenomena… they could be a prelude to an extra-universe invasion."

"Exactly our consensus. It's your job to make the finding specific."

"Aye, sir. Can you assign me other Starships as a reserve force?"

"Negative. I am evacuating all Star Fleet units and personnel within a hundred parsecs of your position. It's tough on you and the *Enterprise*—but that's the card you've drawn. You're on your own, Captain."

Kirk spoke slowly. "I see. You mean… we're the bait."

"Yes."

"I understand, sir. Received and recorded."

"Remember, you're the eyes and ears and muscle of the entire Federation. Good luck, Captain."

"Thank you, sir."

The screen's image faded. Kirk looked at the blankness for a long moment. Then he rose and crossed to Spock. "From the top, Mr Spock. First, we know that the phenomena came from the planet below us. Second, that the danger is real and imminent."

"A closer examination of the surface would seem to be in order," Spock said. "My job, Captain?"

"Yes. And in the meantime I'll have a talk with our unexpected guest. Maybe he can provide some answers."

He certainly seemed able to provide them. In Sickbay, Kirk found McCoy staring dazedly at his patient. The man who'd been nearly pushed through the door of death was out of bed, doing deep knee bends while he inhaled great hearty gulps of air. Kirk stopped in midstride. "Bones! I thought you said—"

McCoy struggled to come out of his daze. "I know what I said and I was going to call you back… but Lazarus—"

"Aye!" shouted the patient. "Lazarus! Up and out of the grave! Hale, hearty and drunk with the wine of victory!"

If the man was mentally sick, he was surely in great physical shape. He had swiftly noted the dubious look on Kirk's face. "You want to know how I came to be down there, Captain? I'll tell you! I was pursuing the devil's own spawn—the thing I have chased across the universe! Oh, he's a humanoid, all right, outside—but on the inside, he's a ravening, murderous monster! But I'll get him yet! I've sworn it!"

"Why?" Kirk said.

The eyes under the heavy brows flamed. "The beast destroyed my entire civilization! To the last man, woman and child! Builders, educators, scientists—all my people! But he missed me. And I will bring him down! Yes, despite his weapons!"

Kirk said, "How did you escape?"

"I was inspecting our magnetic communication satellites, a thousand miles out."

"And he destroyed your whole civilization?" Kirk was openly incredulous.

"Oh, he's capable of it!" Lazarus assured him. "He's intelligent—I give him his due! But he is death! Antilife! He lives to destroy! You believe me, don't you, Captain?"

"Just before we found you," Kirk said, "this ship sustained a number of dangerous and incredible effects. Could this humanoid of yours have been responsible?"

"Of course! It's what I've been telling you!"

He'd wanted an answer. Now he'd gotten one. If it wasn't too satisfying, it was the only one yet available. Lazarus seized on his hesitation. "Then you're with me!" he cried triumphantly, "You'll join my holy cause! You'll help me visit justice upon him—vengeance!"

"My sole cause is the security of my ship," Kirk said. "That and the mission it has undertaken. Bloodshed is not our cause. Remember that." He paused. "Now I want you to beam down to the surface with me. We shall check out your story."

They found Spock examining the conical craft's interior. Two crewmen were busy surveying its hull with tricorders.

"Find anything, Mr Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Negative, Captain." Spock gestured toward Lazarus. "Did you?"

"According to our unexpected guest there's a creature of some sort down here—a humanoid."

Spock nodded. "Lieutenant Uhura communicated that information. I ordered reconfirmation on our sensors. They indicate no living creature on this planet. I suggest, Captain, that you have been lied to."

Kirk shot a hard look at Lazarus. Then he said, "Let's hear the rest of it, Mr Spock."

"Lieutenant Uhura added his statement about some unusual weapon system at the humanoid's disposal."

"Aye!" yelled Lazarus. "He has that—and more! Enough to destroy a vessel as great as your *Enterprise!*

"Does he?" Spock said mildly.

Lazarus was visibly irritated. "Yes," he said shortly.

Spock spoke to Kirk. "There are no weapons of any kind on the planet, Captain. Not in his craft. Nor on the surface. They do not exist."

"You must not believe him, Captain! This one of the pointed ears is just trying to disguise his own incompetence!"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I don't understand your indignation, sir. I merely made the logical deduction that you are a liar."

Kirk wheeled sharply on Lazarus. "All right, let's have it! The truth this time. I—" He stopped. The air around them suddenly broke into shimmering sparkle. There came a sound like the buzzing of an angry bee. As though to ward it off, Lazarus lifted a hand. Then he fisted it, shaking it wildly at the sky. "You've come back then, is that it?" he shouted.'"Well, don't stop! Here I am! Come at me again! We'll finish it!"

Ignoring him, Kirk spoke to Spock. "Can your tricorder identify that atmospheric effect?"

"It's—" Spock was saying when Lazarus bolted off to where the glitter sparkled most strongly. "Run! Run!" he screamed. "It will do you no good! I'll chase you into the very jaws of hell!"

"Lazarus!" Kirk cried. He raced after the man, calling back over his shoulder, "Remain there! All personnel on Security Red!"

He brought up in a rock-walled gully. Ahead of him Lazarus was clambering over its jagged debris. He was moving slowly when the shimmering sparkle engulfed him. At the same moment, Kirk saw that the sky, the rocks and the gully itself were trembling, shifting into indistinctness, their colors, their shapes, their masses liquefying and interflowing. They came into focus again. But Lazarus had staggered backward—and once more the liquefying shimmer had swallowed up the sight of him.

Flailing helplessly, he had tumbled into a peculiar tunnel. It was filled with a ghastly milky whiteness into which walls, roof and floor were constantly dissolving, leaving no solid point of reference required by humankind to determine its place in the universe. Unheard by Kirk, he shrieked, "*You!*" Then the manlike thing was on him. In deadly combat, they writhed, twisted together, hands groping for each other's throats. Lazarus was on his back, choking, when he made a supreme effort, muscles cracking with strain. His assailant was thrown backward. And disappeared into the drifting whiteness.

Reeling drunkenly, Lazarus staggered out of the tunnel into Kirk's sight. Before Kirk could reach him, he fell, striking his head against a boulder. He struggled up to his hands and knees, his face streaked with blood and sweat. Kirk ran to him.

"Lazarus! Where were you? What happened?"

Horror moved in the dazed eyes. "I… saw it again! The Thing! It attacked me… "

"I'll take you back. Hold on to me."

As he was hefting the man to his feet, Spock came through the gully. He hurried to them but Lazarus pushed away his supporting arm. Stepping aside, Spock said, "That effect occurred again, Captain. And it centered right here… almost where we are standing."

Lazarus lifted his head. "I told you! It was the Thing! All whiteness… emptiness…"

Kirk wiped his face clear of its blood and sweat. "There's nothing you can do about it here. We're beaming back to the ship."

The man tried to wrench himself free of Kirk's grasp. "We must kill him first! He tried to kill me! Don't you understand? If we don't stop him, he will kill us all!"

As Kirk watched McCoy apply a dressing to the deep cut on his guest's forehead, doubt of the humanoid's existence continued to trouble him. He had not seen the humanoid. He had not seen the fight. Both had been invisible to him. All he had to go on was the word of Lazarus. He felt a sudden need to confer with Spock. There was a climate of controlled tension in the bridge as he entered it. At Spock's station he lowered his voice.

"Any luck, Mr Spock?"

"Negative, Captain. I can no more explain the second phenomenon than I can the first."

"If there's a shred of truth in what Lazarus said—"

"That a humanoid—a single creature—could be responsible for an effect of such magnitude?"

"Hard to credit," Kirk said.

"Indeed, sir."

"But the rest of his tale seems to fit. His wounds testify to an apparent confrontation with *something*."

"Affirmative, sir."

Kirk took three restless paces and came back. "Then, assuming there is a humanoid, *how* does he cause the effects? He has no weapons, no power system…"

"I'm sorry, Captain. All I know for certain is that the occurrence of the phenomena seems to coincide exactly with the moments Lazarus has one of his alleged confrontations."

Uhura interrupted them. "Doctor McCoy, Captain, asking for you in Sickbay. He says it's urgent."

McCoy was troubled too. He was at his desk, drumming it impatiently with his fingers. "Jim, maybe I'm suffering from delusions; maybe I'm not. You tell me."

"No, Bones. You tell me. That's why I'm here."

McCoy swung around. "Thirty minutes ago you brought Lazarus here and I treated a deep abrasion on his forehead. Right?"

"Right."

"I treated that wound, bandaged it, then stepped in here for a moment."

"The point, Bones."

"Say he's got a constitution like a dinosaur. Recuperative powers ditto—and as we both know, I'm a bright young medic with a miraculous touch. But tell me this. Why, when I returned to my patient, wasn't there a trace of that wound on his forehead? Not even a bruise, Jim. It was as though he'd never been injured!"

Kirk was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "Where is he?"

"I'm just a country doctor, not a private detective. Maybe he stepped out for a cup of coffee…"

But his goal was the *Enterprise* Recreation Room. Spock found him sitting at a table, quietly enjoying himself as he watched two crewmen playing a game. There was no bandage on his forehead. Spock moved to him. "May I sit down?"

He seemed to have recovered from his antagonism. "Yes, of course," he said.

"Earlier," Spock said, "I referred to you as a liar."

"Do you still think I am?"

"About some matters, yes."

Lazarus smiled. "You're very direct. I like that. If it will help make up your mind about me, ask your questions."

"I am curious about this civilization of yours… the one that was destroyed."

"It was much like that of Earth. Green, soft landscapes, blue seas, great cities, science, education…"

"And the people?"

"Like any of us. Good, bad, beautiful, ugly, magnificent… terrible. Human. Satisfied?"

"The story you have told us is most strange and unlikely, as you yourself. You are hardly the same man I spoke to earlier."

"Don't blame me if I'm not consistent, Mr Spock. Not even the universe is that."

"I prefer to think it is," Spock said.

He got a sharp stare. "Yes. Of course you would."

The wall communicator beeped. Spock got up and went to it. "Yes, Lieutenant Uhura?"

"You told me to notify you when the impulse readings reached the critical stage. They've done so."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." He returned to Lazarus. "If you will excuse me, I have an experiment in progress—one that may help me evaluate the facts."

"When you are certain of your facts, will you believe me then?"

"I always believe in facts, sir." He eyed the unbandaged forehead. "I must congratulate you on your remarkable recuperative powers. If time permitted, I would like to discuss them with you." He bowed. "Thank you for your company."

Lazarus was watching him leave when the shimmer suddenly sparkled again. He half-rose from the table, went pallid and almost fell from his chair. The sparkle subsided; and controlling his shaking knees, he moved out into the corridor. The effect came again. The corridor walls faded, dissolving. Then they were back, solid, real. Staring about, Lazarus hauled himself up from where he had fallen. On his forehead was the white tape marking the wound he had received on the planet. He heard Kirk call, "Lazarus!"

McCoy saw him first. They rushed to him, Kirk taking his arm. "Are you all right?"

"What? Oh, yes, Captain. All right! But impatient! Have you decided to help me yet?"

McCoy was staring at him. He stepped forward, seized the edge of the tape and pulled it off. There was a red, neatly sliced cut in the bruised forehead.

"Well…" McCoy said.

Kirk, too, had his eyes fixed on the deep cut.

"Something wrong, Captain?" Lazarus asked.

Kirk glanced at McCoy. "No. Except that I have a ship's physician with a strange sense of humor."

McCoy wheeled. "Jim, this is no joke! I know what I saw!"

The wall communicator beeped. "Bridge. Calling the Captain."

Kirk hit the switch. "Kirk here."

Spock said, "Request you come up, sir."

"Find something?"

"Something quite extraordinary, Captain."

"On my way." He turned a cold eye on Lazarus. "You will come with me. I have some questions still to be answered."

Spock had ordered activation of the main viewing screen. It showed the planet flaring with a single needle point of blinking light. Spock joined Kirk. "A source of radiation, Captain."

"Why didn't our scanners pick it up before?"

"Because it isn't there," Spock said.

Kirk could feel the tension hardening in his midriff. "A riddle, Mr Spock? First Bones, now you."

"What I meant, sir—is, according to usual scanning procedure, there is nothing there that could be causing the phenomenon."

"But the radiation point *is* there."

"Affirmative, sir." Spock hesitated. "I confess I am somewhat at a loss for words. It may be best described, though loosely and inaccurately… as a—" He paused again, his embarrassment to be read only in the particular impassivity of his face. "As… a 'rip' in our universe."

"A *what?*"

"A peculiar physical warp, Captain, in which none of our established physical laws seem to apply with regularity. It was only with our dilithium crystals that I was able to localize it."

Lazarus burst into speech. "Of course! The dilithium crystals! Their power—that could do it!" He whirled to Kirk with a wild shout. "We've got him now, Captain! We've got him!"

"You refer to the humanoid?" Spock inquired.

"Yes! By the gods, *yes!* Now we have him!"

"What have the crystals got to do with it? All they show is a point of radiation," Kirk said.

"But that's it! That's the key—the solution! That's how we can trap him! I implore you… I beg you… I demand—*give me those crystals!*"

Kirk shook his head. "Out of the question. The crystals are the very heart of my ship's power."

The eyes that glared at him were congested with blood. "Fool, don't you understand? There'll be no ship unless this monster is killed! He'll destroy all of you!"

Kirk gritted his teeth. "How, Lazarus? *How?* All I've heard from you is doubletalk—lies—threats that never materialize—explanations that don't hold a drop of water! Now you tell me—*how is my ship in danger? How?*"

The face tightened into hard determination. Lazarus turned and started toward the elevator.

Kirk shouted his name. The man whirled around, fury distorting his heavy features. "I warn you, Captain—you will give me the crystals!"

Kirk spoke very quietly. "Don't threaten me."

"I'm not threatening you. I am telling you I will have my vengeance!" The elevator whirred open and he was gone.

Kirk's tension had broken into open rage. He turned to a guard. "Security! From now on he's your job—your *only* job! If he does anything, tries to—anything at all unusual—notify me at once!"

The guard was already moving toward the elevator.

In the Engineering section Charlene Masters was directing the procedure required to recharge the dilithium crystals. She had opened one of the bins when her assistant turned from the intercom. "Lieutenant Masters," he said, "the Captain is calling."

She moved off to the far wall. As she turned her back, a figure edged from the shadow behind the bins toward the assistant. A powerful arm encircled the man's neck, applying hard pressure to the throat. Then quietly, almost tenderly, it eased him to the ground.

The oblivious Charlene was listening to Kirk say, "Can you prepare an experimentation chamber in ten minutes? All dilithium crystals full power, Lieutenant."

"I'll check, sir." She returned to the bins for readings and went back to the intercom. "Captain? Chamber will be ready in ten minutes. My assistant and I—"

A hand clamped over her mouth. Kirk heard her choking gurgle. "Lieutenant Masters? Masters, what's wrong?"

She managed to wrench her head free for a brief instant. "Captain…!" Her eyes were glazing as she was dropped to the deck.

The Lazarus of the powerful arm bore no sign of a cut on his forehead.

It was a furious Kirk who called the meeting in the Briefing Room. Lazarus, the red wound back on his forehead, sat at the head of the table. Kirk paced up and down behind his chair, his eyes on the blackening finger marks on Charlene Masters' throat. He waited for Spock to enter before he spoke.

"Two of my crewmen have been attacked—*and two of our dilithium crystals are missing!* Without them this ship cannot operate at full power. They must be found!"

He seized the back of the chair Lazarus sat in. Wheeling around, he shouted, "Fact! You said you needed those crystals! Fact! Within an hour after telling me you must have them, *they are missing!*"

Lazarus half-rose from the chair. "And fact!" he cried. "*I didn't take the crystals!*"

His head drooped. "I'm not the one, Captain," he said quietly. "In me the *Enterprise* found only an orphan… Find my enemy. Find the beast—and you'll find your crystals!"

"And just how did your beast get aboard my ship?"

"He has ways! There's no end to his evil!"

Kirk looked at Spock. "If the creature transported up…"

Lazarus laughed. "Transport *up?* I tell you, we are dealing with a Thing capable of destroying worlds! He has your crystals!"

"But why, sir?" Spock asked mildly. "Again we must put the question to you. For what purposes?"

Lazarus leaped from his chair. "The same as mine! Why don't you listen to me? He's humanoid! He can operate a ship! Compute

formulas to exterminate a race! Strangle a man with his bare hands! Or steal an energy source for his vehicle in order to escape me! Are you deaf as well as blind?"

There was something wrong. Trust of this man was impossible to come by. The frustration piled up in Kirk until his fists clenched. "Mr Spock, the crystals certainly aren't here. There is an unexplained source of radiation on the planet. There is clearly some connection. We'll check it out. Prepare a search party at once. Mr Lazarus will beam down with us."

Lazarus smiled. "Thank you, Captain."

Kirk's voice was harsh. "You may not have reason to thank me. That will depend on what we find."

The cone-shaped craft still lay at the base of the cliff. As Kirk opened its door, Lazarus went to him. "Now what do you believe, Captain?"

"I believe the missing crystals are not in your ship. Mr Spock?"

"Unable to locate the radiation source, sir."

"Why not? You had it spotted from the ship."

"It simply seems to have disappeared."

Kirk spoke to the guards. "I want every inch of this terrain checked. Look for footprints, movement, anything. If you spot something, call out. And don't be afraid to use your weapons."

The party fanned out over the terrain, each man at once becoming aware of its empty loneliness. No trees, no vegetation—just the unfolding vista of rock in its multiple formations. Lazarus climbed to a craggy ridge, spined like an emaciated dinosaur petrified by the eons. Along its left slope glacial boulders balanced precariously over a steepness that dropped to a long defile. It ran parallel to the ridge; and Kirk, his tricorder out, was exploring it. Lazarus, lost to sight between two jutting rocks, clutched at one as the space around him began to shimmer. In the hideous sparkle, the rocks, the sky, the very ground under his feet seemed to fade and melt. He spun around, peering for his enemy. But there was only the shimmering nothingness. He found that his movement was slowed down. Stumbling forward, he lurched into a milky-white cocoon place—and a blow struck him to his knees. Vapor-like stuff was in his eyes, his nose, his throat. The vague shape of his assailant leaped on him. They wrestled blindly, bits of the stuff drifting over them. Lazarus kicked the thing. It fell back and vanished as though it had dropped into eternity.

Then the world was solid again. Lazarus careened wildly, still fighting off the absent enemy. He tripped against a rock at the edge of the ridge. It teetered. Lunging forward, he shouted, "*Captain! Look out!*"

Kirk leaped aside. And the massive rock crashed into the defile where he'd been moving the moment before. Then the edge of the ridge crumbled. Lazarus fell at Kirk's feet.

When Spock found them, dust was still drifting down on both men.

McCoy had a stretcher waiting in the Transporter Room. Lazarus was still unconscious. In Sickbay his recovery came hard. Kirk saw the horror twist his face as he struggled back into awareness. He tried to leap from the examining table.

"The Thing!" he cried hoarsely.

"You're on the *Enterprise* now," Kirk said. "Doctor McCoy says you'll be all right."

"How's your head?" McCoy asked.

A hand touched the cut forehead. "It aches."

"You saved my life down there," Kirk said. "I thank you for that." He paused. "But I have to ask you some questions."

"Jim! A possible concussion—"

"It's necessary!" Kirk flared.

"Go ahead, Captain," Lazarus said.

"I am holding," Kirk said, "a computer report on the information you gave us during your initial screening. It calls you a liar, Lazarus. For one thing, there is no planet at the location you claimed to have come from. There never has been."

Lazarus sat up, his eyes on Kirk's face. "You wouldn't believe the truth if I told it to you," he said slowly.

"Try us," Kirk said.

"About my home planet… I distorted a fact in the interest of self-preservation and my sacred cause. You, too, are a stranger to one, Captain—an unknown factor." He swung his legs from the table, making a tentative effort to stand.

"I needed help, not censure," he said. "Freedom, not confinement as a madman. If I told you the truth, I feared that was what you'd call me."

"The truth now, if you please," Kirk said.

Lazarus looked at him, his deep passion thickening his voice. "All right, sir! My planet, my home—or what's left of it—is down there

below us!”

Kirk stared at him, dumbfounded. “What are you saying?”

“That my space ship is more than a space ship. It is also a time chamber… a time ship. And I, if you will, am a time traveler.”

Kirk frowned. This man was a compounder of mysteries. All he had told were lies… and yet that vessel of his, like nothing before seen on heaven or earth, its unrecognizable complexities… He spoke tonelessly. “And this thing you search for? Is it a time traveler, too?”

The eyes went wild. “Yes! He’s fled me across all the years, all the empty years! To a dead future on the dead planet he murdered!” He was feverish now, staggering to his feet. “Help me, man! You have more crystals! Give me the tools I need to kill him!” He tottered and McCoy grabbed him. He wrenched free of the supporting arm.

“The crystals! What are they to the abomination I hunt? What is anything compared to its supernal evil? Do you want him to get away?”

“Lazarus, there are a lot of things going on that we know nothing about. But *you* know. Now tell me—*where are our crystals?*`

“I told you!” Lazarus shouted. “He has them! He took them!”

They had to ease him back on the table or he would have fallen. He lay there, prone, his eyes glassy, face streaming with sweat. McCoy said, “He’s got to rest, Jim. And would you mind getting that muscle man out of my Sickbay?”

Nodding, Kirk dismissed the guard. Uneasy, he watched McCoy cover Lazarus with a sheet. There was a deep sigh and the eyes closed. “He’s in a lot of pain, Jim.”

“Pain,” Kirk said. “Sometimes it can drive a man harder than pleasure.” He looked at the face on the table. It was whiter than the sheet. “But I guess he won’t be going anywhere for a while—not this time.”

As the door closed behind them, the sheeted form moved. The eyes opened. Grasping the table, Lazarus hauled himself to his feet. He faltered, shaking his head to clear it. Then, cautiously, stealthily, motored by his inexorable determination, he moved to the door.

Kirk chose the Briefing Room to put the Big Questions to Spock. He turned from his restless pacing to cry, "But just what have we got? A magnetic effect which produces your 'wink-out' phenomenon. And a mysterious, unidentifiable source of radiation on the planet. Lazarus, a walking powder-keg. Your 'rip' in the universe. That murdering humanoid none of us have seen…"

Spock looked up from his computer tie-in. "True, Captain. But what is significant to me is the fact that our ship's instruments are specifically designed to locate and identify any physical object in the universe, whether it be matter or energy."

"But using them you were unable to identify that source of radiation on the planet!"

"Correct, sir."

"Are the instruments in order?"

"In perfect operating condition."

"Then what you say leaves only one conclusion. The source of that radiation is not of our universe."

"Nor in it, Captain. It came from outside."

Kirk resumed his pacing. "Yes—outside of it. That would explain a lot! Another universe… perhaps in another dimension… but occupying the same space at the same time."

"The possibility of the existence of a parallel universe has been scientifically conceded, Captain."

"All right. What would happen if another universe, say a minus universe, came into contact with a positive one such as ours?"

"Unquestionably a warp, Captain. A distortion of physical laws on an immense scale."

"That's what we have been experiencing! The point where they touch—couldn't it be described as a hole?"

Their two minds seemed to meet and meld. Spock nodded vigorously. "Indeed, Captain. I also point out that a hole in the universe—or in a simple container—can either allow the contents to escape or—"

"What is outside to enter it!" Kirk shouted. "Mr Spock, the invasion that Commodore Barstow suspected!"

"There is no evidence of any large-scale invasion, sir."

"But a small-scale invasion! Spock! What's your evaluation of the mental state of Lazarus?"

"At one moment, paranoid. But the next, calm, rational, mild. Almost as if he were—" Spock paused on the edge of light. "Almost as if he were two men."

"Exactly! Two men—different but identical. And a hole in the universe! No! Not a hole! A door, Spock, a door!"

"You *are* hypothesizing a parallel universe, Captain!"

"And why not? It's theoretically possible! Look at Lazarus! One minute he's at the point of death… but the next alive and well, strong as a bull. That cut on his forehead. First he has it, then it's gone—and then he has it again! For one man it's all physically impossible!"

"I agree, Captain. There are unquestionably two of him."

"But… what's going on? This leaping from one universe to the other? The wild rant about a murdering thing that destroys civilizations! What's the purpose?"

"Captain, madness has no purpose. No reason. But—it could have a goal!" Spock's face was stony as his Vulcan blood triumphed over his human agitation. "He must be stopped, Captain! Destroyed, if necessary."

"Spock, I'm not following you now."

"Two universes, sir! Project this! One positive, one negative. Or, more specifically, one of them matter—and the other one, antimatter!"

Kirk regarded him for a tense moment. "But matter and antimatter—they cancel one another out… violently."

"Precisely… under certain conditions. When identical particles of matter and antimatter meet—identical, Captain, like—"

"Like Lazarus—like the two of them. Identical, except that one is matter and the other antimatter. And if they meet…"

Kirk had never heard Spock's voice so somber. "Annihilation, Captain. Total, complete, annihilation…"

"And of everything that exists… everywhere…"

It was a moment for failure in speech. They stared at each other as the fate of worlds, known and unknown, dropped itself into their laps.

Lazarus found the corridor deserted. He turned the corner that led to Engineering; and sidling through its door, went swiftly to an electrical relay panel. Its maze of wires struck him as primitive. It took him barely a moment to remove a tool from his jumper suit, detach a connection and affix the wire to a different terminal. Closing the panel, he waited, a shadow in the darker shadow behind a throbbing dynamo.

Far to his left, Charlene Masters was studying the effect of recharge on her dilithium crystals. Above the bins the needle of a thermometer-like device had wavered up toward a red mark. It climbed above it—and a wisp of smoke drifted up from one of the lower dials. She looked away from the installation to examine the chart held by her assistant. They smelled the smoke at the same time. "The energizer! It's shorted!" she cried.

There was a flashing spray of sparks. A great, billowing cloud of smoke engulfed them. "Get out of here, Ensign! Sound the alarm!" She was coughing.

"You, too, Lieutenant!"

"No! I've got to—"

"You've got to get out of here!" he shouted. "The whole bank might blow!" He seized her arm, dragging her through the still-thickening smoke. Half-blinded, choking, they staggered out into the corridor. As they passed him, Lazarus, a piece of torn sheet held over his nose and mouth, shut the door quietly behind them.

Charlene was at the wall communicator. "Engineering! Fire! Energizing circuits!"

Uhura whirled from her board. "Fire, Captain! Engineering! Situation critical!"

"All available hands, Lieutenant! On the double! Spock! On me!"

The Ensign, still coughing, his face black-streaked, met them at the door to Engineering. "Under control, sir. But it couldn't have—Captain, that fire did not start by itself!"

Spock said, "Lazarus, Captain? A ruse? To get at the dilithium crystals?"

"Way ahead of you, Mr Spock."

They both plunged into the smoky room. Coughing, Kirk groped his way to the bins. "He's got them all right. And he's beaming down right now. I'm going after him. Get together a Security detail. Follow me as soon as you can."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Lazarus had tied the crystals in the torn sheet. Materialized, he hurried directly to his craft. In its working area, he unwrapped them exultantly. Shaking his fist at his invisible foe, he yelled, "Now I'll do it. I have a threshold! Run! Run! I've got you now!"

Bending to his labor, he selected certain rods and wires that soon assumed the shape of a protective frame before the ship's

entrance. He worked quickly, arranging what were obviously premade units. In them he carefully placed the dilithium crystals. When the last one was safely installed, he raised his fists skyward, howling like a wolf, "It's done! It's finished! Finished!"

Kirk, nearing the ship, heard" him. Phaser extended, he said, "Wrong, Lazarus. *You're* finished. Through. Back up!" He stepped through the door.

"No!" Lazarus shrieked.

The warning came too late. The shimmering sparkles flared. Kirk vanished.

Lazarus, head huddled in his arms, cried, "No! Not you! *Not you!*"

For Kirk, banished into the tunnel of negative magnetism, time and space died. He was spuming in a kind of slow motion where familiar time was boundless and empty space stuff that broke off against his face in fluffy hunks. He was falling but he was also rising. He was twisting while at the same time he lay still. The nightmare of an absolute disorientation was crawling over him. The shimmer shimmered. It faded—and he found himself on his hands and knees, fighting nausea.

Vaguely, with disinterest, he saw rocks, gullies, the old dry desolation, the cliff that sheltered the time craft. The ship was gone. There was no sign of it—no sign of anything or anybody. He got slowly to his feet, staring at the cliff base where the craft should have been. After a moment, he hefted the phaser in his hand, unsure that it was real. It was—solid, real against his palm. He looked around again before he called, "Hello!"

The word echoed back from the rocks. Then only the silence spoke.

He took off at a run up a slope. It gave on to a plateau. The time craft was there, set in a little open space, but no sign of life about it. Then the Lazarus of the uncut forehead rose from his stooping position. He, too, was rigging some kind of framework before the ship's entrance. He smiled at the aimed phaser. "Welcome, Captain. I wasn't expecting you."

"No," Kirk said. "*Him*."

"You understand then?"

"Not completely. This is clearly a parallel universe."

"Of course."

"Antimatter?"

"Here, yes."

"And if identical particles meet…"

"The end of everything, Captain. Of creation. Of existence. All gone." He squared his broad shoulders. "I'm trying to stop him. It's why I took your dilithium crystals."

"He has two more."

Lazarus searched Kirk's face. "That's very bad, Captain. If he can come through, at a time of his own choosing. But I think, if we hurry… and you will help me, he can yet be stopped. But we have little time."

It was Spock who materialized before the other time ship, still at the foot of the cliff. The matter Lazarus, the wound on his forehead, stood at its door, violently waving his arms. "Back! Back!" he screamed. "If you ever want to see your Captain alive again, get back!"

"Do what he says," Spock told his Security guards.

Up on the plateau, the second Lazarus had his threshold frame almost completed. He pointed to a tool; and as Kirk handed it to him, he said, "He meant to come through this but when you accidentally contacted it, it drained his crystals. It will take him at least ten minutes to reenergize with the equipment on board his craft. That should give us time enough…"

"Just exactly what did I contact?" Kirk said.

"I call it the alternative warp, Captain. It's the negative magnetic corridor where the parallel universes come together. It's… the safety valve. It keeps eternity from blowing up."

"This corridor," Kirk said. "Is it what caused the magnetic effect —that sort of 'wink-out' phenomenon?"

"Precisely, Captain. But not because of its existence. Only because *he* entered it. The corridor is like a jail with explosives attached to its door. Open the door—and the explosives may detonate. Stay inside the corridor—"

"And the universe is safe," Kirk said.

"Your universe and mine, Captain. Both of them."

"Surely he must know what would happen if he ever does meet you face to face outside that corridor."

"Of course he knows. But he is mad, Captain. You've heard him. His mind is gone. When our people found the way to slip through the warp… when they proved the existence of another identical universe, it was too much for him. He could not live, knowing that I lived. He became obsessed with passion to destroy me. The fact

that my death would also destroy him—and everything else—cannot matter to him."

Kirk spoke slowly. "So you're the terrible Thing… the murdering monster… the creature of evil…"

"Yes. Or he is. It depends on the point of view, doesn't it?"

He made a final adjustment. "It's ready, Captain. If we can force him into the corridor while I'm there waiting for him, we can put an end to this. But if he comes through the warp at a time of his own choosing—and breaks into this universe to find me…"

"I understand," Kirk said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Find him. Force him through his threshold frame and into the corridor. I'll be waiting. I'll hold him there."

Kirk's face had fallen into very sober lines. "You can't hold him forever."

"Can't I, Captain? You are to destroy his ship."

"But if I do that—won't this one also be destroyed?"

"It will."

"And that door—that warp—will be closed to you."

"Yes. But it will be closed to him, too."

"You'll be trapped with him," Kirk said. "You'll be trapped with him in that corridor forever… at each other's throats… throughout the rest of time."

"Is it such a large price to pay for the safety of two universes?"

Lazarus reached out and placed Kirk within the frame of his threshold. "The safety of two universes." Kirk looked at the brave man. "Are you sure you want me to do this?"

"You must do it, Captain. We have no choice. Are you ready?"

Kirk's voice was steady. "I'm ready."

"Send him to me. I'll be waiting in the corridor."

He threw a switch. The shimmering sparkles tingled over Kirk's body—and he was back on the plateau, the other space craft before him. Spock ran toward him. He shook his head, waving him back.

The first Lazarus was busy at his threshold frame, his back to Kirk. He moved a lever. The structure glowed, then flashed into glitter. "You're done!" he told it exultantly.

Kirk jumped him. But he whirled in time to block the tackle with his heavy body. Then they closed, wrestling, Kirk, silent, intent, boring in as he fought to back the man into the frame. His aim became clear to Lazarus. "*No!*" he yelled. "You can't! I'm not

ready! Not now! Not yet!" He seized a thick metal tool for bludgeon. Kirk ducked the blow, rising fast to connect a hard fist to his jaw. Lazarus wavered; and Kirk held him, pushing, pushing him backward until he stumbled, toppling over into the frame. The sparkle caught him. There was a blinding glare of whiteness—and he was gone.

Kirk pulled in a deep lungful of breath. Spock took over. Turning to his teen, he said, "Get those dilithium crystals back to the ship. Hurry!" Then he spoke to Kirk. "Captain, am I right in guessing that this craft must be completely destroyed?"

"To the last particle."

"And what of Lazarus, sir?"

"Yes," Kirk said. "What of Lazarus, Mr Spock?"

There was no out. And Kirk, back in his command chair, knew it. He'd chosen the Service; and if he'd been unaware of what would be required of a Starship Captain back in those long-ago Academy days, the choice was still his. Nor could any human being expect to foresee the consequences of any decision. Met up with them, all you could do was deal with them as responsibly as you could. He'd had to remind himself of this truth a thousand times—but this time…

He spoke into his intercom. "Activate phaser banks."

Somebody said, "Phaser banks activated, sir."

"Stand by to fire."

Under the words Kirk was seeing that corridor of negative magnetism. A man of solid Earth, he was remembering its frightful unearthliness, its chilling paradoxes—and he saw two men, two humans locked into it, embattled, each of them winning and losing, rising and falling, eternally victorious and eternally vanquished throughout an unbroken Forever.

He licked dry lips.

"Phasers standing by, sir."

His lips felt rough. He licked them. "Fire phasers," he said.

The beams struck the ship on the plateau. It disintegrated. Then they switched to the one at the cliff's base. It burst into flame and vanished. On the screen only the desolate landscape remained.

Solution—simple.

"Let's get out of here," Kirk said. He turned to the helmsman. "Warp one, Mr Leslie."

"Warp one, sir."

Spock was beside him. "Everything all right, Captain?"

"It is for us, Mr Spock."

Spock nodded. "There is, of course, no escape for them."

"No, Mr Spock. No escape at all. How would it be to be trapped with that raging madman at your throat… at your throat throughout Time everlasting? How would it be?"

"But the universe is safe, Captain."

"Yes… for you and me. But what of Lazarus?" He paused as though posing the question to that universe Lazarus had saved.

The stars slid by the *Enterprise*. They didn't answer its Captain.

TOMORROW IS YESTERDAY

(D. C. Fontana)

The star was very old—as old as it is possible for a star to be, a first-generation star, born when the present universe was born. It had had all the experiences possible for a star—it had had planets; had gone nova, wiping out those planets and all those who lived upon them; had become an X-ray star; then a neutron star. At last, slowly collapsing upon itself into an ultimately dense mass of pseudomatter resembling—except for its compaction—the primordial ylem out of which it had been created, it drew its gravitational field in so closely about itself that not even the few dim red flickers of light left to it could get out, and it prepared to die.

The star was still there, still in its orbit, and still incredibly massive despite its shrunken volume; but it could no longer be seen or detected. It would soon be in a space all its own, a tiny sterile universe as uninteresting and forgotten as a burial jug. It had become a black star.

The *Enterprise*, on a rare trip back toward the Sol sector and Earth, hit the black star traveling at warp factor four—sixty-four times the speed of light.

It could not, of course, properly be said that the *Enterprise* hit the black star itself. Technically, the bubble of subspace in which the *Enterprise* was enclosed, which would have been moving at 64C had the bubble impossibly been in normal space at all, hit that part of the black star's gravitational cocoon that had also begun to extrude into subspace. The technicalities, however, are not very convincing. Since no such thing had ever happened to a starship before, nobody could have predicted it, and the theoreticians are still arguing about just why the collision produced the results it did.

About the results themselves, nobody is in any doubt

Captain Kirk dragged himself up from unconsciousness and shook his head to clear it. This was a mistake, and he did not try it a second time. The bridge was dim and quiet; the main lights were off, so was the screen, and only a few telltales glowed on the boards. Crew personnel—Spock, Uhura, Sulu—were slumped in their seats; Ames, the security chief, was spilled crookedly on the deck. It looked like the aftermath of a major attack. "Spock!"

The first officer stirred, and then got shakily to his feet. "Here, Captain. What in the nine worlds?"

"I don't know. Everything was normal, and then, blooey! Check us out."

"Right." In immediate control of himself, Spock ran a quick check of his library computer. Except for a few flickers here and there on the board, it was dead, as Kirk could see himself. Spock abandoned it without a second thought and went promptly to Uhura.

"Except for secondary systems, everything is out, sir," he said. "We are on impulse power only. If Mr Scott is still with us, the auxiliaries should be on in a moment. Are you all right, Lieutenant?"

Uhura nodded wordlessly and smiled at him, though it was not a very convincing smile. At the same moment, the main lights flickered on, brightened and steadied. A hum of computers and pumps began to fill in the familiar, essential background noise that was as much a part of life on the *Enterprise* as the air.

"Mr Scott," Spock said, straightening, "is still with us."

Sulu sat up groggily, also shook his head, and also apparently decided against trying the experiment a second time. Kirk flicked a switch on his chair panel.

"This is the captain," he said. "Damage control parties on all decks, check in. All departments tie in to the library computer. Report casualties and operational readiness to the first officer. Kirk out. Miss Uhura, contact Starfleet control. Whatever we hit in the Base Nine area, I want them alerted—and maybe they'll know something about it we don't. Mr Spock?"

Spock half-turned from his station, an earphone still to one ear. "Only minor injuries to the crew, Captain. All decks operating on auxiliary systems. Engineering reports warp engines nonoperational. Mr Scott overrode the automatic helm setting and is using impulse power to hold us in fixed orbit, but?"

"Fixed orbit around what, Mr Spock?"

"The Earth, sir. I am at present unable to say how we got here."

"Screen on," Kirk said.

The screen came on. It was the Earth below them, all right.

"We're too low in the atmosphere to retain this altitude," Spock said. "Engineer reports we have enough impulse power to achieve escape velocity."

"Helm, give us some altitude."

"Yes, sir," Sulu said. "Helm answers. She's sluggish, sir."

"Sir," Uhura said. "Normal Starfleet channel has nothing on it but static. I'm picking up something on another frequency, but it's not identifiable."

"Put it on audio, Lieutenant."

Uhura flicked a tumbler and the loudspeaker on her board burst out: "? five-thirty news summary. Cape Kennedy—the first manned moon shot is scheduled for Wednesday, six a.m., Eastern Standard Time. All three astronauts set to make this historic flight are?"

Kirk was up out of his chair on the instant. "The first manned moon shot!" he said. "You've got some sort of dramatization. That shot was back in the 1970s."

Uhura nodded and tried another channel, but from the computer, Spock said slowly: "Apparently, Captain, so are we."

"Mr Spock, this is no time for joking."

"I never joke," Spock said severely. "At present I have only rough computations, but apparently what we hit was the subspace component of an intense spherical gravity field, very likely a black star. The field translated our momentum in terms of time—a relativistic effect. I can give you an exact reading in a few moments, but 1970 seems to be of about the right order of magnitude."

Kirk sat down again, stunned. Uhura continued scanning. Finally she said, "Captain, I'm picking up a ground-to-air transmission in this sector."

"Verified," Spock said. "Our scanners are picking up some kind of craft approaching from below us, under cloud cover and closing fast."

The loudspeaker said: "Blue Jay Four, this is Black Jack. We're tracking both you and the UFO."

"I have him on my screen," another voice said. "Following."

"Good, let's get this one for once."

"Mr Sum," Kirk said, "can we gain altitude faster?"

"I'm trying, sir, but she's still slow in responding."

"Blue Jay Four, have you got visual contact yet?"

"I can see it fine," said the second voice. "And it's huge too. As big as a cruiser, bigger maybe. It is saucer-shaped, but there're two cylindrical projections on top and one below."

"We have two more nights scrambled and on the way," said the first voice. "They'll rendezvous with you in two minutes."

"Won't be here, Black Jack. The UFO is climbing away fast."

"Blue Jay Four, close on the object and force it to land. We want it down—or at least disabled until the other planes arrive. After thirty years of rumors, this may be our first clear shot."

"Acknowledged. Closing in."

"Can he harm us?" Kirk said.

"I would judge so, Captain," Spock said. "The aircraft is an interceptor equipped with missiles, possibly armed with nuclear warheads. Since we do not have the power for a full screen, he could at least damage us severely."

"Scotty!" Kirk said into his microphone. "Activate tractor beam. Lock onto that aircraft and hold it out there."

"Captain," Spock said, "that type of aircraft may be too fragile to take tractor handling."

"Tractor on, sir," Scott's voice said briskly. "We have the target."

Spock looked into his hooded viewer and shook his head. "And it is breaking up, Captain."

"Transporter room! Can you lock on the cockpit of that aircraft?"

"No problem, Captain."

"Beam that pilot aboard," Kirk said, springing up. "Spock, take over."

The figure who materialized in the transporter chamber was a strange sight to Kirk until he removed his oxygen mask and helmet. Then he was revealed as a medium-tall, compactly built man with an expression of grim determination despite his obvious amazement. He would have made a good starship crewman, Kirk thought? centuries from now.

"Welcome to the *Enterprise*," Kirk said, smiling.

"You? you speak English!"

"That's right," Kirk said. "You can step down from our transporters, Mr? ?"

"Captain John Christopher," the pilot said stiffly. "United States Air Force, serial number 4857932. And that's all the information you get."

"Relax, Captain. You're among friends. I'm Captain James T. Kirk, and I apologize for bringing you aboard so abruptly. But we had no choice. I didn't know your ship couldn't hold up under our tractor beam until it was too late."

"Don't give me any double-talk," Christopher said. "I demand to know?"

"You're in no position to demand anything, but we'll answer all your questions anyhow in good time. Meanwhile, relax. You're our guest. I have a feeling you'll find it interesting."

He led the way out of the transporter room. Christopher shrugged and followed. As they moved down the corridor, he was obviously missing nothing; clearly a trained observer. When a pretty young crew-woman carrying a tricorder went past them, however, he had trouble retaining his composure. "Passenger?" he said.

"No, crew. About a fourth of the crew is female—exactly a hundred at the moment."

"A crew of four hundred?"

"Four hundred and thirty. Now if you'll step aboard the elevator?"

Christopher did, and was immediately startled once more when it moved horizontally instead of up or down. After digesting this peculiarity, he said: "It must have taken quite a lot of money to build a ship like this."

"Indeed it did. There are only twelve like it in the fleet."

"The fleet? Did the Navy??"

"We're a combined service, Captain," Kirk said. "Our authority is the United Federation of Planets."

"Federation of—Planets?"

"That's right. Actually, Captain—this is a little difficult to explain. We? we're from your future. A time warp landed us back here. It was an accident."

"You people seem to have a lot of them," Christopher said drily, "if all the UFO reports stem from the same kind of source. However, I can't argue with the fact that you are here, ship and all." While he spoke, the elevator doors snapped open to reveal the bridge, with Spock in the command chair. "And I've never believed in little green men."

"Neither have I," Spock said, rising.

This time Christopher made no attempt to conceal his astonishment. *And Spock claims he never jokes*, Kirk thought; but he said only, "Captain Christopher, this is my first officer, Commander Spock."

"Captain," Spock said with an abrupt but courteous nod.

"Please feel free to look around the bridge, Captain. I'm sure you have the good sense not to touch anything. I think you'll find it interesting."

" 'Interesting,'" Christopher said, "is not a very adequate word for it." He moved over toward the communications and library-computer stations, but could not help shooting another look at Spock as he did so. Kirk did not explain; everybody else on board took the half-alien first officer as a matter of course, and Christopher might as well practice doing the same; he might be with them for quite a while yet.

"We have achieved a stable orbit out of Earth's atmosphere, Captain," Spock said. "Our deflector shields are operative now, and ought to prevent us from being picked up again as a UFO." He made a grimace of distaste over the word. "Mr Scott wishes to speak to you about the engines."

"Very well, Mr Spock. I know that expression. What else is on your mind?"

"Captain Christopher."

Kirk looked toward the newcomer. He was talking to Uhura; the spectacle of a beautiful Bantu girl operating a communications board evidently had diverted him, at least temporarily, from the first officer.

"All right, what about him?"

"We cannot return him to Earth," Spock said. "He already knows too much about us and is learning more. I mean no aspersions on his character, about which I know nothing, but suppose an unscrupulous man were to gain possession of the knowledge of man's certain future, as represented by us? Such a man could speculate—manipulate key industries, stocks, even nations—and in doing so, change what must be. And if it is changed, Captain, you and I and everything we know might be made impossible."

"We'd just vanish? Including thousands of tons of *Enterprise*?"

"Like a soap bubble."

"Hmm. You know, Spock, your logic can be very annoying." Kirk looked back at Christopher. "That flight suit must be uncomfortable. Have the quartermaster issue Captain Christopher

some suitable clothes—tactfully relieving him of any sidearms he may be carrying in the process—and then I want to see you and him in my quarters."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk was talking to the computer when they came in; he waved them to seats. "Captain's log, supplemental. Engineering Officer Scott reports warp engines damaged but repairable. Ascertain precise degree and nature of damage, compute nature and magnitude of forces responsible, and program possible countermeasures."

"Affirm; operating," said the computer's voice in mid-air. Christopher did not react; evidently he was getting used to surprises.

"Kirk out. Now, Captain, we have a problem. To put the matter bluntly, what are we going to do with you? We can't put you back."

"What do you mean, can't? Mr Spock here tells me that your transporter can work over even longer distances than this."

"It's not the transporter," Kirk said. "You know what the future looks like, Captain. If anybody else finds out, they could change the course of it—and destroy it."

"I can see that," Christopher said after a moment. "But it also strikes me that my disappearance would also change things."

"Apparently not," Spock said. "I have run a computer check through all historical tapes. They show no relevant contribution by any Captain John Christopher. There was a popular author by that name, but it was a pen name; you are not he."

Christopher was visibly deflated, but not for long. He stood and began to pace. Finally he swung back toward Kirk.

"Captain," he said, "if it were only a matter of my own preference, I'd stay. I'd give my right arm to learn more about this ship—*all* about it. It's a colossal achievement and obviously it implies even greater ones in the background. But my preference doesn't count. It's my duty to report what I've seen. I have an oath to uphold." He paused, then added pointedly: "What would you do?"

"Just that," Kirk said. "I entirely understand. You are the kind of man we recruit for our own service, and can never get enough of, though we don't have oaths any more. But unfortunately, this means that you are also of superior intelligence. We cannot risk any report that you might make."

"I have a wife and two children," Christopher said quietly. "I suppose that makes no difference to you."

"It makes a lot of difference to me," Kirk said. "But I cannot let it sway me."

"In both your trades—the pilot and the warrior—there was always an unusually high risk that you would become a casualty," Spock said. "You knew it when you married; so did your wife. You bet against the future, with high odds against you. Unfortunately, we are the future and you have lost; you are, in effect, now a casualty."

"Mr Spock is no more unfeeling than I am," Kirk added. "But logic is one of his specialties, and what he says is quite true. I can only say I'm sorry, and I mean it." The intercom interrupted him. "Excuse me a moment. Kirk here."

"Engineer here, Captain. Everything's jury-rigged, but we're coming along with the repairs and should be ready to reenergize in four hours."

"Good. Scotty, you can fix anything."

"Except broken hearts, maybe. But, sir?"

"What is it? Plow right ahead."

"Well, sir," Scott's voice said, "I can fix the engines, but I canna build you a time machine. We'll be ready to go, but we've no place *to* go in this era. Mister Spock tells me that in the 1970s the human race was wholly confined to the Earth. Space outside the local group of stars was wholly dominated by the Vegan Tyranny, and you'll recall what happened when we first hit *them*. D'ye see the problem?"

"I'm afraid," Kirk said heavily, "that I do. Very well, Mr Scott, carry on."

"Yes, sir. Out."

Christopher's face was a study in bitter triumph; but what he said next, oddly, was obviously designed to be helpful—or at least, to establish that his own hope was well-founded.

"Mr Spock here tells me that he is half Vulcan. Surely you can reach Vulcan from here. That's supposed to be just inside the orbit of Mercury."

"There is no such solar planet as Vulcan," Kirk said. "Mr Spock's father was a native of The Vulcan, which is a planet of 40 Eridani. Of course we could reach that too?"

"? but in the 1970's," Spock finished. "If we took the *Enterprise* there, we would unwrite *their* future history too. Captain, this is

the most perfect case of General Order Number One that I have ever encountered—or think I am likely to encounter."

"The order," Kirk explained to Christopher, "prohibits interference with the normal development of alien life and alien societies. It hadn't occurred to me until Mr Spock mentioned it, but I'm sure it would be construed to apply here too."

"Too bad, Captain," Christopher said. He was not bothering to conceal his triumph now. "Maybe I can't go home—but neither can you. You're as much a prisoner in time as I am on this ship."

"I believe, sir," Spock said, "that Captain Christopher's summary is quite exact."

It was indeed exact, but not complete, as Kirk quickly realized. There was also the problem of supplies. The *Enterprise* could never land on any planet—and certainly would not dare to land on this one, its own home world, even if it were possible—and it was simply ridiculous to even consider trying to steal food, water and power by gig or transporter for 430 people. As for Christopher—who had already tried to escape through the transporter and had come perilously close to making it—what prospects did he have if the *Enterprise* somehow did get back to its own time? He would be archaic, useless, a curiosity. Possibly he could be retrained sufficiently to find a niche, but never retrained to forget his wife and children. To check that, Kirk visited McCoy, the ship's surgeon.

"Get him down here and I'll check," McCoy said.

Kirk put in the call. "You mean it *might* be done?"

"It depends upon the depth of his commitment. Some marriages are routine. I'll have to see what the electroencephalograph shows."

"You're starting to sound like Spock."

"If you're going to get nasty, I'll leave." Kirk grinned, but the grin faded quickly. "If the depth of his commitment is crucial, we're sunk. He's the kind who commits himself totally. Witness yesterday's escape attempt."

Spock came in with the prisoner—after the escape attempt, there was no other honest word for it. He said at once: "Captain, I do not know what Dr McCoy has in mind, but I think it may be useless by now; I have some new information. I find I made an error in my computations."

"This," McCoy said drily, "could be a historic occasion."

Spock ignored the surgeon. "I find that we must return Captain Christopher to Earth after all."

"You said I made no relative contributions." Christopher said sourly.

"I was speaking of cultural contributions. I have now checked the genetic contributions, which was a serious oversight. In running a cross-check on that factor, I discovered that your son, Colonel Shaun Geoffrey Christopher, headed? *will* head the first successful Earth—Titan probe, which is certainly significant. If Captain Christopher is not returned, there won't be any Colonel Christopher to go to the Saturnian satellites, since the boy does not yet exist."

The grin on Christopher's face made him look remarkably like a Halloween pumpkin. "A boy," he said, to nobody in particular. "I'm going to have a son."

"And we," McCoy said, "have a headache."

"No," Kirk said. "We have an obligation. Two obligations, mutually antagonistic."

"It is possible that we can satisfy both of them at once," Spock said.

"How? Out with it, man!"

"I have the data you ordered the computer to work out, and there is now no question but that the only reason we are here at all is because we had a head-on collision with a black star. To get back home, we are going to have to contrive something similar."

"Do you know of any black stars around here? And how will that solve our problem with Captain Christopher?"

"There is a black star quite nearby, in fact, Captain, but we cannot use it because it is well out of transporter range of Earth. That would prevent our returning Captain Christopher. But Engineering Officer Scott thinks we may be able to use our own sun. It will, he says, be a rough ride, but will also offer us certain advantages. Briefly, if we make a close hyperbolic passage around the sun at warp eight?"

"Not with *my* ship," Kirk said coldly.

"Please, Captain, hear me out. We need the velocity because we must compensate for the Sun's relatively weak gravitational field. And I spoke of advantages. What will happen, if nothing goes wrong, is that we will retreat further into time as we reach the head of the hyperbola?"

"Just what we need," McCoy said.

"Shut up, Bones, I want to hear this."

"? and as we mount the other leg of the curve, there will be a slingshot effect that will hurl us forward in time again. If this is most precisely calculated, we will pass within transporter range of the Earth within two or three minutes *before* the time when we arrived here the first time, before we first appeared in the sky. At that moment, we reinject Captain Christopher into his plane—which will not have been destroyed yet—and the whole chain of consequences will fall apart. Essentially, it will never have happened at all."

"Are you sure of that?"

Spock raised his eyebrows. "No, sir, of course I am not sure of it. Mr Scott and I think it may work. The computer concurs. Certainty is not an attainable goal in a problem like this."

"True enough," Kirk agreed. "But I don't see that it solves our problem with Captain Christopher at all. It gets him back home, but with his memories intact—and that's what we have to avoid at all costs. I would rather destroy the *Enterprise* than the future."

There was a brief silence. Both Spock and McCoy knew well what such a decision had cost him. Then Spock said gently, "Captain, Mr Scott and I see no such necessity. Bear in mind that Captain Christopher will arrive home *before* he was taken aboard our ship. He will have nothing to remember—because none of it will ever have happened."

Kirk turned to the pilot from the past. "Does that satisfy you?"

"Do I have a choice?" Christopher said. "Well, I won't quibble. It gets me home—and obviously I can't do my duty if I can't remember what it is. Only?"

"Only what?"

"Well, I never thought I'd make it into space. I was in line for the space program, but I didn't qualify."

"Take a good look around, Captain," Kirk said quietly. "You made it here ahead of all of them. We were not the first. You were."

"Yes, I know that," Christopher said, staring down at his clenched fists. "And I've seen the future too. An immense gift. I? I'll be very sorry to forget it."

"How old are you?" McCoy said abruptly.

"Eh? I'm thirty."

"Then, Captain Christopher," McCoy said, "in perhaps sixty more years, or a few more, you will forget things many times more important to you than this—your wife, your children, and indeed

the very fact that you ever existed at all. You will forget every single thing you ever loved, and what is worse, you will not even care."

"Is that," Christopher said angrily, "supposed to be consoling? If that's a sample of the philosophy of the future, I can do without it."

"I am not counseling despair," McCoy said, very gently. "I am only trying to remind you that regardless of our achievements, we all at last go down into the dark. I am a doctor and I have seen a great deal of death. It doesn't discourage me. On the contrary, I'm trying to call to your attention the things that are much more valuable to you than the fact that you've seen men from the future and a bucketful of gadgetry. You will have those still, though you forget us. We are trying to give them back to you, those sixty-plus years you might otherwise have wasted in a future you could never understand. The fact that you will have to forget this encounter in the process seems to me to be a very small fee."

Christopher stared at McCoy as though he had never seen him before. After a long pause, he said, "I was wrong. Even if I did remember, I would do nothing to destroy a future that? that has even one such man in it. And I see that underneath all your efficiency and gadgetry, you're *all* like that. I am proud to be one of your ancestors. Captain Kirk, I concur in anything you decide."

"Your bravery helped to make us whatever we are," Kirk said. "Posts, everybody."

"And besides," Spock added, "it is quite possible that we won't make it at all."

"Now there," McCoy said, "is a philosophy *I* can do without."

Kirk said evenly, "We will take the chance that we have. If you'll join me on the bridge, Captain Christopher, we will at least give you a bumpy last ride for your money."

Christopher grinned. "That's the kind I like."

It was indeed a bumpy ride. Warp Eight was an acceleration called upon only in the most extreme of emergencies—although this surely classified as one—and could not be sustained for long without serious damage to the *Enterprise*. It was decidedly unsettling to hear the whole monstrous fabric of the ship, which ordinarily seemed as solid as a planet, creaking and straining around them as the pressure was applied, and to hear the engines —usually quite quiet—howling below decks.

For Kirk, it was almost more unsettling to watch the planets begin to both revolve and rotate in the wrong direction in the navigation tank, as the combined acceleration and gravitational energies were translated into motion backwards in time. Perhaps fortunately for his sanity, he did not have to watch long, however, for the close approach to the sun eventually made it necessary to close off all outside sensors. They were flying blind. Then the swing was completed, and the sensors could be opened again—and now the planets were moving in their proper directions, but rather decidedly too fast, as the *Enterprise* shot up the time curve. In the Transporter Room, Captain Christopher waited tensely, in full flight dress.

"Passing 1968," Spock said from his post. "January 1969? March? May? July? the pace is picking up very rapidly? November?"

Kirk gripped the arms of his chair. This was going to have to be the most split-second of all Transporter shots. No human operator could hope to bring it off; the actual shift would be under the control of the computer.

"June? August? December? into 1970 now—" Suddenly, and only for an instant, the lights dimmed. It was over so quickly that it could almost have been an illusion.

"Transporter Room! Did you—?" But there was no time to complete the question. The lights dimmed again, all the stars in the heavens seemed to be scrambling for new places, and there was a huge wrench in what seemed to be the whole fabric of the universe.

At last the stars were stable—and the instruments showed the *Enterprise* to be doing no more than Warp One. The gigantic thrust had all been drained off into time.

"Well, Mr Spock?"

"We made it, sir," Spock said quietly.

"Transporter Room, did you get a picture of the shot?"

"Yes, sir. Here it is."

The still picture glowed on an auxiliary screen. Kirk studied it. It showed Captain Christopher in the cockpit of his undestroyed airplane. He looked quite unharmed, though perhaps a bit dazed.

"And so we have revised Omar," Mr Spock said.

"Omar?" Kirk said. "Which part?"

"The verse about the moving finger, sir. The poet says that once it writes, it moves on, and we have no power to unwrite a line of it. But it would appear, sir, that we have."

"No," Kirk said, "I don't think that's the case. History has *not* been changed—and it's quite possible that we would have been unable to do anything else than what we in fact did. That's a question for the philosophers. But as of now, Mr Spock, I think Omar's laurels are still in place."

THE RETURN OF THE ARCHONS

(Boris Sobelman)

Once it had been a hundred years before—that time past when the Starship *Archon* had been lost to mysterious circumstances on the planet Beta 3000.

Now it was time present; and the two crewmen from another Starship, the *Enterprise,* down on the same planet scouting for news of the *Archon,* seemed about to list themselves as "missing," too. They were running swiftly down a drab street of an apparently innocuous town of the apparently innocuous planet when one of them stumbled and fell. Sulu, his companion, paused, reaching down a muscular hand. "O'Neill, get up! We've got to keep going!"

Nobody on the street turned to look at them. Nobody offered to help them. If ever there were passers-by, the inhabitants of Beta 3000 could qualify for the "I don't care" prize. Still prone on the street, Lieutenant O'Neill was panting. "It's no use, Mr Sulu. They're everywhere! Look! There's one of them—there's one of the Lawgivers!" He gestured toward a hooded creature who was approaching, a staff in its hand. Then he pointed to a second figure, similarly hooded, robed and staved. "They're everywhere! We can't get away from them!"

Sulu opened his communicator. "Scouting party to *Enterprise!* Captain, beam us up! Quick! Emergency!" He looked down at O'Neill. "Just hold on, Lieutenant. They'll beam us back to the ship any minute now—"

But O'Neill had scrambled wildly to his feet. "Run, I tell you! We've got to get away! You know what they're capable of!"

"O'Neill—"

But the Lieutenant was racing down the street. Sulu, distracted, his eyes on the flying figure of O'Neill, was scarcely aware that the nearest hooded being had lightly touched him with its staff. He was conscious only of a sudden sense of peace, of the tension in him ebbing, giving way to an inflow of a beatific feeling of unmarred tranquillity. He was not permitted to enjoy it for long.

The *Enterprise's* Transporter had fixed on him—and he was shimmering into dematerialization.

But completing his transportation wasn't easily accomplished. On the *Enterprise* the Transporter's console lights flicked on, dimmed, flicked off, brightened again. Kirk, with Scott and young sociologist Lindstrom, watched them. When Sulu's figure finally collected form and substance, he was astonished to see it clad, not in its uniform, but in the shaggy homespun of the shapeless trousers and sweater that was the customary male apparel of Beta 3000's citizenry. He hurried forward. "Sulu, what's happened? Where's Lieutenant O'Neill?"

Sulu's answer was dull as though something had thickened his tongue. "You… you are not of the Body."

Kirk glanced at Scott. The engineer nodded. Speaking into his mike, he said, "Dr McCoy… Transporter Room, please. And quickly."

It was with most delicate care and deliberation that Sulu stepped from the Transporter platform. He looked at Lindstrom and his face was suddenly convulsed with fury. He lifted the bundled uniform he held under an arm—and lifting it up, he shook it furiously at Lindstrom. "You did it!" he shouted. "They knew we were Archons! These are the clothes Archons wear! Not these, not these—" he gestured to his own rough clothing. Then he hurled the uniform at Lindstrom.

Kirk said, "Easy, Sulu. It's all right. Now tell me what happened down there."

Sulu staggered. As Kirk extended a hand to steady him, McCoy hurried in, medical kit in hand. He halted to stare. "Jim! Where's O'Neill?"

Kirk shook his head for answer; and Sulu, tensing as though to receive a message of immense significance, muttered "Landru… Landru…"

The sheer meaninglessness of the mutter chilled Kirk. "Sulu, what happened down there? What did they do to you?"

The answer came tonelessly. "They're wonderful," Sulu said. "The sweetest, friendliest people in the universe. They live in paradise, Captain."

Nor in Sickbay could McCoy elicit anything from Sulu but the same words, the same phrases over and over. He talked gramophonically, like a record damned to endlessly repeat itself. It was this repetitiousness added to his inability to account either for

his own condition or O'Neill's disappearance that decided Kirk to beam down to the planet with an additional search detail. When they materialized—Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Lindstrom, and two security crewmen—it was alongside a house, a brick house that bordered on an alley facing a wide street.

"Materialization completed," Kirk said into his communicator. "Kirk out." As he snapped it shut, he saw that Lindstrom had already edged out into the street and was examining it, his young face alight with interest and curiosity. They followed him—and at once, among the passing people, Kirk noted two hooded beings, cowled and in monkish robes who carried long stafflike devices. What could be seen of their faces was stony, as though any expression might divulge some secret of incalculable value. Their eyes looked dead—filmed and unseeing. One of the people, a man, shambled toward them. His smile was as vacuous as it was amiable; but Kirk took care to return his nod.

As he moved on, Spock said, "Odd."

"Comment, Mr Spock?"

"That man's expression, Captain. Extremely similar to that of Mr Sulu when we beamed him up from here. Dazed, a kind of mindlessness."

"Let's find out if all the planet's inhabitants are like him," Kirk said. He walked boldly out into the street, followed by his group. Each of the passers-by they met greeted them with the same bland smile. Then a young, biggish man with an empty, ingenuous face stopped to speak to Kirk. "Evenin', friend. Mah name's Bilar. What's yourn?"

"Kirk."

He got the stupid smile. "You-all be strangers."

Kirk nodded and Bilar said, "Here for the festival, ayeh? Got a place to sleep it off yet?"

"No. Not yet," Kirk said.

"Go round to Reger's house. He's got rooms." The oafish face glanced down the street at the clock in the tower of what might have been the Town Hall. "But you'll have to hurry. It's almost the Red Hour."

The shorter hand of the clock was close to the numeral six. "This festival," Kirk said, "it starts at six?"

But Bilar's interest had been distracted by a pretty girl, dark and slim, who was hurrying toward them. He put out a hand to stop her. "Tula, these here folks be strangers come for the festival. Your daddy can put them up, can't he?"

Tula, her dark eyes on Lindstrom's handsome blond-ness, smiled shyly. "You're from over the valley?" she asked.

Lindstrom smiled back at her. "That's right. We just got in."

"Don't see valley folks much. My father'll be glad to take you in. He don't care where folks come from."

"He runs a rooming house?" Kirk said.

She laughed. "That's a funny name for it. It's right over there." She pointed to a comfortable-looking, three-story structure down the street—and at the same moment the tower clock struck the first stroke of six. A scream, strident, sounding half-mad, broke from the respectable-faced matron near by. A man, a foot or so away from Kirk, suddenly lunged at him. Kirk elbowed the blow aside, hurling him back, and cried to his men, "Back to back!" They closed together in the defensive movement. Then pandemonium, apparently causeless, burst out around them. Men were grimly embattled, battering at each other with bare fists, stones, clubs. A fleeing woman, shrieking, was pursued across the street by a man, intent, silent, exultant. From somewhere came the crashing sounds of smashing windows. Then, to their horror, Tula, twisting and writhing, opened her mouth to a high ecstatic screaming. Bilar rushed at her, shouting, "Tula, Tula! Come!" He seized her wrist, and as Lindstrom leaped forward to grapple with him, stooped for a stone on the street He crashed it down on Lindstrom's shoulders, felling him. McCoy, hauling the sociologist back to bis feet, cried, "Jim, this is madness!"

"Madness doesn't hit an entire community at once, Bones—" Kirk broke off, for rocks had begun to fall among them. One of their attackers, aiming a thick club at him, yelled "Festival! Festival! Festival!" Froth had gathered on the man's lips and Kirk said, "Let's go! That house—where the girl was taking us!—make for it!"

Bunched together, they moved down the street; a young woman, beautiful, her dress torn, grabbed Kirk's arm, pulling at it to drag him off. He shook her loose and she ran off, shrieking with wild, maniacal laughter. More rocks struck them and Kirk, wiping a trickle of blood from a cut on his cheek, shouted, "Run!"

The bedlam pursued them to the door of the house. Kirk hammered on it. And after a moment it was opened. Kirk slammed it closed behind them; one of the three elderly men who confronted him stared at him in astonishment. "Yes?"

"Sorry to break in like this," Kirk said. "We didn't expect the kind of welcome we received."

One of the other men spoke. "Welcome? You are strangers?"

"Yes," Kirk said. "We're… from the valley."

The third man said, "Come for the festival?"

"That's right," Kirk told him.

"Then how come you here?"

Kirk addressed the first man who had greeted them. "Are you Reger?"

"I am."

"You have a daughter named Tula?"

"Yes."

Lindstrom burst into speech. "Well, you'd better do something about her! She's out there alone in that madness!"

Reger averted his eyes. "It is the festival," he said. "The will of Landru…"

The third man spoke again. "Reger, these are young men! They are not old enough to be excused!"

"They are visitors from the valley, Hacom," Reger said.

In the wrinkled sockets of Hacom's eyes shone a sudden, fanatic gleam. "Have they no Lawgivers in the valley? Why are they not with the festival?"

Kirk interposing, said, "We heard you might have rooms for us, Reger."

"There, Hacom, you see. They seek only a place to rest after the festival."

"The Red Hour has just begun!" Hacom said.

The tone was so hostile that Reger shrank. "Hacom, these be strangers. The valley has different ways."

"Do you say that Landru is not everywhere?"

The second man tried to assume the role of peacemaker. "No, of course Reger does not blaspheme. He simply said the valley had different ways."

Reger had recovered himself. "These strangers have come to me for lodging. Shall I turn them away?" Then, speaking directly to Kirk, he said, "Come, please.,."

"But Tula, the girl!" Lindstrom cried. "She's still out there!"

Hacom eyed him with openly inimical suspicion. "She is in the festival, young sir. As you should be."

Uneasy, Reger said, "Quickly, please. Come."

Kirk, turning to follow, saw Hacom turn to the second man. "Tamar, the Lawgivers should know about this!"

Tamar's reply was gently equivocal. "Surely, Hacom, they already know," he said. "Are they not infallible?"

But Hacom was not to be appeased. "You mock them!" he cried. "You mock the Lawgivers! And these strangers are not of the Body!" He strode to the street door, flung it open—crying, "You will see!"—and disappeared.

His departure did not dismay Kirk. They were on the right trail. Incoherent though they were, the references to "Landru," to membership in some vague corpus, corporation, brotherhood, or society they termed the "Body" matched the ravings of Sulu on his return to the *Enterprise.* He was content with the progress they'd made, though the room they were shown into was bare except for a dozen or so thin pallets scattered about its floor. From the open window came the screamings and bowlings of the riotous festival and its celebrations. Reger spoke tentatively to Kirk. "Sir, you can return here at the close of the festival. It will be quiet. You will have need of rest."

"Reger," Kirk said, "we have no plans to attend the festival."

The news shook his host. He went to the window and lifted it more widely open to the uproarious hullabaloo outside. "But the hour has struck!" he cried. "You can hear!"

"What I'd like to hear is more about this—festival of yours," Kirk said. "And about Landru I'd like to hear."

Reger cringed at the word "Landru". He slammed down the window. "Landru," he whispered. "You ask me… you are strange here… you scorn the festival. Are you—who are you?"

"Who is Landru?" Kirk said.

Reger stared, appalled, at him. Then, wheeling, he almost ran from the room. Lindstrom made a move to reopen the window and Kirk said, "Leave it shut, Mr Lindstrom."

"Captain, I'm a sociologist! Don't you realize what's happening out there?"

"Our mission," Kirk said evenly, "is to find out what happened to the missing Starship *Archon* and to our own Lieutenant O'Neill. We are not here to become involved with—"

Lindstrom interrupted excitedly. "But it's a bacchanal! And it occurred spontaneously to these people at one and the same time! I've got to know more about it—find out more!"

Kirk's voice had hardened. "Mr Lindstrom, you heard me! This is not an expedition to study the folkways of Beta 3000!"

Spock broke in. "Captain, in view of what's happening outside, may I suggest a check on Mr Sulu's condition? What were his

reactions… if any—at the stroke of six o'clock?"

Kirk nodded. "Thank you, Mr Spock." He flipped open his communicator to say, "Kirk here. Lieutenant Uhura, report on Mr Sulu."

"I think he's all right now, sir. How did you know?"

"Know what, Lieutenant?"

"That he'd sort of run amuck. They're putting him under sedation, sir."

"How long ago did he run amuck? Exactly?"

"Six minutes, Captain."

"Did he say anything?"

"Nothing that made any sense, sir. He kept yelling about Landru, whatever that is. Is everything all right down there, Captain?"

"So far. Keep your channels open. Kirk out."

"Landru," he said reflectively—and moved to the window. The street scene it showed was not reassuring. To the left two men flailed at each other with hatchet-shaped weapons. Another, chasing a shrieking, half-naked woman across the street, vanished, shouting, around a corner. Bodies were scattered, prone in the dust of the street. A short distance down it a building was aflame; among the people still milling about before Reger's house, riots erupted unchecked, then subsided only to break out again. A big bonfire blazed in the street's center.

Kirk turned away to re-face his men. "My guess is we have until morning. Let's put the time to good use. Bones, we need atmospheric readings to determine if something in the air accounts for this. Lindstrom, correlate what you've seen with other sociological parallels, if any. Mr Spock, you and I have some serious thinking to do. When we leave here in the morning, I want to have a plan of action."

The night did not vouchsafe much sleep. But the twelve noisy hours that moved the tower clock's small hand to the morning's sixth hour finally passed; at the first stroke of its bell, absolute silence fell upon the town. In the room of pallet beds, all but Kirk had at last sunk into sleep. Stiff with the tension of his night-long vigil, he moved among them, waking them. Then he heard the house reverberate to the slam of the front door. It was with no sense of surprise that he also heard Tula's hysterical sobbing. Lindstrom was at the door before him. Kirk put a hand on his

shoulder. "Take it easy, Mr Lindstrom. If she's taking it hard, you'd better take it easy."

They found Tamar with Reger. The father, his face agonized, held the bloody, bedraggled body of his daughter in his arms. She twisted away from him, resisting comfort.

"It's all right now, child. For another year. It's over for another year."

Kirk called, "Bones! You're needed. Get out here!"

As McCoy removed his jet-syringe from his medical kit, Kirk saw the look of anxious inquiry on Reger's face. "It will calm her down," he said quietly. "Trust us, Reger."

Lindstrom, watching, could not contain himself. There was scorching contempt in his voice as he cried, "You didn't even try to bring her home, Reger! What kind of father are you, anyway?"

Reger looked up, his eyes tortured. "It is Landru's will," he said.

"Landru again." Kirk's comment was toneless. "Landru—what about Landru? Who is he?"

Reger and Tamar exchanged terrified glances. Then Tamar said slowly, "It is true, then. You did not attend the festival last night."

"No, we did not," Kirk said.

Reger gave a wild cry. "Then you are not of the Body!" He stared around him as though seeking for some point from which to orient himself in a dissolving world. He made no move as McCoy, noting the effects of his shot, gently moved Tula to a nearby couch where he laid her down. "She's asleep," he said.

Reger approached her, peering at her stilled face. Then he looked at McCoy. "Are you… are you… Archons?"

"What if we are?" Kirk said.

"It was said more would follow. If you are indeed Archons—"

Tamar cried, "We must hide them! Quickly! The Lawgivers…"

"We can take care of ourselves, friend," Kirk told him.

"Landru will know!" Tamar screamed. "He will come!"

The front door crashed open. Two hooded Lawgivers stood on the threshold, Hacom beside them. The old man pointed a shaking finger at Tamar. "He is the one! He mocked the Lawgivers! I heard him!"

Tamar had shrunk back against the wall's support. "No, Hacom… it was a joke!"

"The others, too!" cried Hacom. "They were here, but they scorned the festival! I saw it!"

One of the hooded beings spoke. "Tamar… stand clear."

Trembling, scarcely able to stand, Tamar bowed his head. "I hear," he said, "and obey the word of Landru."

The Lawgiver lifted his staff, pointing it at Tamar. A tiny dart of flame springing from its end struck straight at his heart. He fell dead.

Stunned, Kirk said, "What—?"

The Lawgiver, ignoring the fallen body between them, addressed Kirk. "You attack the Body. You have heard the word, and disobeyed. You will be absorbed."

He raised his staff again; and Lindstrom, making a swift reach for his phaser, was stopped by a gesture from Kirk.

"What do you mean, absorbed?" he said.

"There! You see?" Hacom's voice was venomous. "They are not of the Body!"

"You will be absorbed," said the Lawgiver. "The good is all. Landru is gentle. You will come."

For the first time the second Lawgiver lifted his staff, pointing it at the *Enterprise* party. Reger spoke, hopelessness dulling his voice. "You must go. It is Landru's will. There is no hope. We must all go with them… to the chambers. It happened with the Archons the same way."

Slowly, with deadly deliberation, the two staves swerved to focus on Kirk and Spock. Reger, fatalistically obedient, was moving toward the door when Kirk said, "No. We're not going anywhere."

The stony faces showed no change. The first Lawgiver said, "It is the law. You must come."

Kirk spoke quietly. "I said we're not going anywhere."

The two cowled creatures stared. Then, hesitantly, they moved back a step. After a moment, the first one bent his hood to the other in a whispering conference. Spock, edging to Kirk, said, "Sir, they obviously are not prepared to deal with outright defiance. How did you know?"

"Everything we've seen seems to indicate some sort of compulsion—an involuntary stimulus to action. I just wanted to test it."

"Your analysis seems correct, Captain. But it is a totally abnormal condition."

The two Lawgivers had ended their conference. The first one spoke heavily. "It is plain that you simply did not understand. I will

rephrase the order. You are commanded to accompany us to the absorption chambers."

Kirk pointed down at Tamar's crumpled body. "Why did you kill this man?"

"Out of order. You will obey. It is the word of Landru."

"Tell Landru," Kirk said, "that we shall come in our own good time… and we will speak to him."

A look of horror filled the stony faces. The first Lawgiver pushed his staff at Kirk. Kirk knocked it from his hand. The creature gaped as it clattered to the floor. Lindstrom picked it up, looked at it briefly, and was handing it to Spock when the Lawgiver, as though listening, whispered, "You… cannot. It is Landru."

Both Lawgivers froze. Spock, the staff in hand, spoke to Kirk. "Amazing, Captain. This is merely a hollow tube. No mechanism at all."

Kirk glanced at it. Neither of the Lawgivers gave the slightest sign of having heard. Reger jerked at Kirk's sleeve. "They are communing," he said. "We have a little time. Please come… come with me."

"Where to?" Kirk said.

"A place I know of. You'll be safe there." Urgency came into his voice. "But hurry! You must hurry! Landru will come!"

His panic was genuine. After a moment, Kirk signaled his men. They followed Reger out the door, passing the motionless figures of the Lawgivers. Outside, the street was littered with the debris of the festival—shattered glass, rocks, broken clubs, remnants of ripped homespun garments. In the windless air, smoke still hung heavily over a fire-gutted building. But the people who passed were peaceful-looking, their faces again amiable, utterly blank.

"Quite a festival they had," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, what do you make of all this?"

"It is totally illogical. Last night, without apparent cause or reason, they wrought complete havoc. Yet today…"

"Now," Kirk said, "they're back to normal." He frowned. "To whatever's normal on this planet. Bilar, for instance. Here he comes as blandly innocent as though he were incapable of roaring like an animal."

Bilar stopped. "Mornin', friends," he said.

Reger returned the greeting and Lindstrom angrily seized his arm. "He's the thing who did that hurt to your daughter! Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"No," Reger said. "It wasn't Bilar. It was Landru." He shook himself free, turning back to the others. "Hurry! We haven't much time left."

He broke off, staring around him. "It's too late!" he whispered. "Look at them!"

Four passers-by had paused, standing so still they seemed not to breathe. All of them, eyes wide open, were frozen into attitudes of concentrated listening.

"What is it?" Kirk demanded.

"Landru!" Reger said. "He is summoning the Body. See them gathering?"

"Telepathy, Captain," Spock said.

Suddenly people were breaking free of their listening stances to pick up discarded missiles from the littered street. Slowly, like automatons, they began to move toward the *Enterprise* group. In the blankly amiable faces there was something chilling now, mindlessly hostile and deadly.

Kirk said, "Phasers… on stun. Which way, Reger?"

Reger hesitated. "Perhaps… through there, but Landru…"

"We'll handle Landru," Kirk said. "Just get us out of this!"

It was as they moved toward the alley ahead of them that the rocks came hurling against them. A man struck at Spock with a club, the smile on his lips as vacant as his eyes. Then Kirk saw that another armed group had appeared at the far end of the alley. Rocks were flying toward them.

Kirk spoke tersely to Reger. "I don't want to hurt them. Warn them to stay back!"

Reger shook his head despairingly. "They are in the Body! It is Landru!"

Threatening, people were converging on them from both ends of the alley and Kirk, jerking out his phaser, snapped his orders. "Stun only! Wide field! Fire!"

The stun beams spurted from their phasers with a spray effect. The advancing mob fell without a sound. Kirk whirled to confront the rear group. Again, people fell silently. Spock moved to one of the unconscious bodies. "Captain!"

Kirk went over to him. The quiet face that stared blankly up into his was that of Lieutenant O'Neill. He turned to call to his two security crewmen. "Security—over here!" Then he spoke to Reger. "This is one of our men," he said.

"No more," Reger reminded him. "He's been absorbed."

"Nonsense!" Kirk said briskly. "We'll take him along with us, Mr Spock."

"I tell you he's one of them now!" Reger cried. "When he wakes Landru will find us through him! Leave him here! He's our enemy. He's been absorbed!"

The full implications of the word struck Kirk for the first time. "Absorbed?" he said.

"The Body absorbs its enemies. It kills only when it has to." Reger's voice sank to a terrified whisper. "When the first Archons came, free, out of control, opposing the word of Landru, many were killed. The rest were absorbed. Leave him here. Be wise."

"We take him with us," Kirk said.

Lindstrom spoke. "Captain, now that we've got O'Neill, let's beam out of here."

"Not yet. We still have to find what happened to the Archons. Reger, which way?"

Reger pointed ahead, indicating a left turn at the end of the alley. The Security men picked up O'Neill as the group hurriedly followed Reger's lead. It introduced them into a cellarlike chamber, dark, but bulked with shadowy objects of odds and ends. As the guards set O'Neill down against a wall, Reger crossed to a wall to open a cabinet from which he extracted a flat package, wrapped in rags. Revealed, it turned out to be a translucent panel. A section of it, touched, began to glow with strong light that illuminated the entire room.

Spock said, "Amazing in this culture! I go further. Impossible in this culture!"

Reger turned. "It is from the time before Landru."

"Before Landru? How long ago is that?" Kirk said.

"We do not know positively. Some say… as long as six thousand years." Reger spoke with a certain pride. Spock was examining the lighting panel with his tricorder. "I do not identify the metal, Captain. But it took a very advanced technology to construct a device like this. Inconsistent with the rest of the environment."

"But not inconsistent with some of the things we've seen," Kirk said. "Those staffs, those hollow tubes, obviously antennae for some kind of broadcast power. Telepathy—who knows?" He saw the look of astoundedness quiet Spock's face into a more than usual expressionlessness. "What is it, Spock?"

"I am recording immensely strong power generations, Captain…'

"Unusual for this area?"

"Incredible for *any* area." Spock leaned closer to his tricorder. "Near here but radiating in all directions—"

A groan from O'Neill broke into his voice. McCoy, looking up from his bent position over the unconscious man, spoke to Kirk. "He's coming around, Jim."

Reger uttered a shout. "He must not! Once he is conscious, Landru will find us. Through him. And if the others come—"

"What others?" Kirk said.

"Those like me… and you. Who resist Landru."

"An underground," Spock said. "How are you organized?"

"In threes," Reger told him. "Myself… Tamar who is dead now… and one other."

"Who?" Kirk said.

Reger hesitated. "I don't know. Tamar was the contact."

"Jim," McCoy said, "I need a decision. Another few seconds—"

"He must not regain consciousness!" Reger screamed. "He would destroy us all. He is now of the Body!"

Kirk bit his lip. Then he looked down at O'Neill. "Give him a shot, Bones. Keep him asleep." He whirled on Reger. "I want some answers now. What is the Body?"

"The people. You saw them."

"And the Lawgivers?" Spock asked.

"They are the arms and legs."

"That leaves a brain," Kirk said.

Inflection drained from Reger's voice. "Of course," he said. "Landru." In a mechanical manner as though speaking a lesson learned by rote, he added, "Landru completes the Whole. Unity and Perfection, tranquility and peace."

Spock was eyeing him. "I should say, Captain, that this is a society organized on a physiological concept. One Body, maintained and controlled by the ones known as Lawgivers, directed by one brain…"

Kirk said, "A man who—"

"Not necessarily a man, Captain."

Kirk turned to Reger. "This underground of yours. If Landru is so powerful, how do you survive?"

"I do not know. Some of us escape the directives. Not many but some. It was that way with the Archons."

"Tell me about the Archons," Kirk said.

"They refused to accept the will of Landru. But they had invaded the Body. Landru pulled them down from the sky."

Incredulous, Kirk said, "Pull a Starship down?" He turned to Spock. "Those power readings you took before. Are they—"

Spock completed the sentence. "Powerful enough to destroy a Starship? Affirmative, Captain."

They looked at each other for a long moment. Then Kirk flipped out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Come in!"

But it wasn't Uhura who responded. It was Scott, his voice taut with strain. "Captain! We're under attack! Heat beams of some kind. Coming up from the planet's surface!"

"Status report," Kirk said.

"Our shields are holding, but they're taking all our power. If we try to warp out, or even move on impulse engines, we'll lose our shields—and burn up like a cinder!"

"Orbit condition, Scotty?"

"We're going down. Unless those beams get off us so we can use our engines, we're due to hit atmosphere in less than twelve hours."

Spock came to stand beside him as he said, "Keep your shields up, Scotty. Do everything you can to maintain orbit. Well try to locate the source of the beams and stop them here. Over."

Static crashed into Scott's reply, drowning his words.

"? impossible… emergency by-pass circuits but… whenever you… contact…"

Kirk turned the gain up, but the static alone grew loud. Spock had unlimbered his tricorder. Now he called, "Captain! Sensor beams! I believe we're being probed." He bent over his device, concentrated. "Yes. Quite strong. And directed here."

"Block them out!" Kirk cried.

"It's Landru!" Reger yelled.

Spock made an adjustment on his tricorder. Then he shook his head. "They're too strong, Captain. I can't block them." He lifted his head suddenly from his tricorder, then whirled to the wall on his left. A low-pitched humming sound was coming from it. Kirk, in his turn, faced the wall. On it a light had begun to glow, coiling and twisting in swirling patterns. They brightened, and at the same moment started to gather into the outline of a figure. It seemed to be collecting substance, the flesh and bone of a handsome elderly man. The eyes had kindness in them and the features, benign, composed, radiated wisdom. It appeared to be

regarding them with benevolence. But its face and body kept their strange flowing movement.

The figure on the wall said, "I am Landru."

Reger fell to his knees, groaning in animal terror. Spock, observant, quite unawed, said, "A projection, Captain. Unreal."

"But beautifully executed, Mr Spock. With no apparatus at this end."

The kindly eyes of the wall man fixed on him. "You have come as destroyers. That is sad. You bring an infection."

"You are holding my ship," Kirk said. "I demand you release it."

The mouth went on talking as though the ears had not heard. "You come to a world without hate, without conflict, without fear… no war, no disease, no crime, none of the old evils. I, Landru, seek tranquillity, peace for all… the Universal Good."

This time Kirk shouted. "*We* come on a mission of peace and goodwill!"

Landru went on, oblivious. "The Good must transcend the Evil. It shall be done. So it has been since the beginning."

"He doesn't hear you, Captain," Spock said.

Lindstrom drew his phaser. "Maybe he'll hear this!"

"No!" Kirk's rebuke was sharp. "That'll do no good." He turned back to the lighted figure. "Landru, listen to us."

"You will be absorbed," said the benign voice. "Your individuality will merge with the Unity of Good. In your submergence into the common being of the Body you will find contentment and fulfillment. You will experience the Absolute Good."

The low-pitched hum had grown louder. Landru smiled tenderly upon them. "There will be a moment of pain, but you will not be harmed. Peace and Good place their blessings upon you."

Kirk took a step toward the image. But the humming abruptly rose to a screeching whine that pierced the ears like a sharpened blade. Reger toppled forward. McCoy and Lindstrom, driven to their knees, held their ears, their eyes shut. One after the other the security crewmen crumpled. Spock and Kirk kept their feet for a moment longer. Then, they, too, the spike of the whine, thrusting deeper into their brains, pitched forward into unconsciousness.

Kirk was the first to recover. He found himself lying on a thin pallet pushed against one of the bare stone walls of a cell. Lifting his

head, he saw Lindstrom stir. Getting to his knees, he crawled over to Spock. "Mr Spock! Mr Spock!"

Slowly Spock's eyes opened. Kirk bent over Lindstrom, shaking him and the security guard beside him. "Wake up, Lindstrom! Mr Lindstrom, wake up!"

Spock was on his feet. "Captain! Where's the Doctor?"

"I don't know. He was gone when I came to. So was the other guard."

"From the number of pallets on the floor, sir, I should say they have been here and have been removed."

"Just where is here?" Kirk said.

Spock glanced around. "A maximum-security establishment, obviously. Are you armed, sir?"

"No. All our phasers are gone. I checked." He went to the heavy, bolted door. "Locked," he said.

"My head aches," observed Lindstrom.

"The natural result of being subjected to sub-sonic, Mr Lindstrom," Spock told him. "Sound waves so controlled as to set up insuperable contradictions in audio impulses. Stronger, they could have killed. As it was, they merely rendered us unconscious."

"That's enough analysis," Kirk said. "Let's start thinking of ways out of here. Mr Spock, how about that inability of those Lawgivers to cope with the unexpected?"

"I wouldn't count on that happening again, Captain. As well organized as this society seems to be, I cannot conceive of such an oversight going uncorrected." He paused. "Interesting, however. Their reaction to your defiance was remarkably similar to the reactions of a computer—one that's been fed insufficient or contradictory data."

"Are you suggesting that the Lawgivers are mere computers—not human?"

"Quite human, Captain. It's just that all the facts are not yet in. There are gaps—"

He broke off. A rattle had come from the door. Kirk and the others sprang to the alert—and the door opened. A Lawgiver, his staff aimed at them, entered, followed by McCoy and the missing security man. Both were beaming vacantly, happily. Kirk stared at McCoy, dismay in his face. The Lawgiver left, closing the door behind him. The lock snapped.

"Bones…"

McCoy smiled at Kirk. "Hello, friend. They told us to wait here." He started toward a corner pallet, no sign whatever of recognition in his empty eyes.

"Bones!" Kirk cried. "Don't you know me?"

McCoy stared at him in obvious surprise. "We all know one another in Landru, friend."

Spock said, "Just like Sulu, Captain."

Kirk seized McCoy's arm, shaking it. "Think, man!" he cried. "The *Enterprise!* The ship! You remember the ship!"

McCoy shook his head bewilderedly. "You speak very strangely, friend. Are you from far away?"

Kirk's voice was fierce. "Bones, try to remember!"

"Landru remembers," McCoy said. "Ask Landru. He watches. He knows." A flicker of suspicion sharpened his eyes. "You are strange. Are you not of the Body?"

Kirk released his arm with a groan. McCoy at once lost his suspicious look, and, smiling emptily at nothing, moved away to sit down on one of the pallets.

The door opened again to the grinding of freed locks. Two Lawgivers stood in the entrance. One aimed his staff at Kirk. "Come," the cold voice said.

Kirk exchanged a quick glance with Spock. "And what if I don't?" he said.

"Then you will die."

"They have been corrected, Captain," Spock said. "Or reprogrammed. You'd better go with them, sir."

Kirk nodded. "All right. Spock, work on Bones. See if you can—"

"Come!" said the Lawgiver again.

Both staffs were aimed at Kirk as he passed through the cell door. As the heavy door swung to behind him, Spock whirled to McCoy. "Doctor, what will they do to him?"

McCoy smirked at him beatifically. "He goes to Joy. He goes to Peace and Tranquility. He goes to meet Landru. Happiness is to all of us who are blessed by Landru."

The room to which the Lawgivers were escorting Kirk was of stone—a room he was to remember as the "absorption chamber". A niche in a wall was equipped with a control panel. As he was prodded into the room, Kirk saw that another Lawgiver stood at the niche. Against another wall a manacle hung from a chain. Kirk was shoved toward it, one of his captors holding him while the other fastened the gyve about his wrist. Then they turned and left

the room. Their footsteps had barely ceased to echo on the stone floor of the corridor outside when a fourth Lawgiver entered. He didn't so much as glance at Kirk but moved to his fellow at the control panel, nodding curtly.

Finally, he turned. "I am Marplon," he said. "It is your hour. Happy communing."

The Lawgiver at the panel bowed. "With thanks," he said. "Happy communing." Then, like the others, he left the absorption room. Alone now, Marplon faced Kirk. It seemed to Kirk that his visage resembled a death mask. But Marplon could move. When he had he placed a headset over his hood, his hands touched the control panel with the authority derived from much experience. The room flooded with bright, flashing colors; a humming sound began. The lights were blinding and the sound seemed to echo itself in Kirk's head. He twisted in his bonds.

At the same moment, back in the detention cell, Lindstrom was pacing it angrily. He halted to confront Spock. "Are we just going to stay here?"

"There seems to be little else we can do," Spock told him mildly. "Unless you can think of a way to get through that locked door."

"This is ridiculous! Prisoners of a bunch of Stone Age characters running around in robes."

"And apparently commanding powers far beyond our comprehension. Not simple, Mr Lindstrom. Not ridiculous. Very, very dangerous."

On his last word the cell door opened and the two Lawgivers who had apprehended Kirk walked in. This time they aimed their staffs at Spock.

"You," said the spokesman. "Come."

For a fleeting second, Spock hesitated. The tip of one of the staffs quivered. Spock took his place between his guards. They led him out. They led him out and down the corridor to the absorption chamber. Kirk greeted him, an imbecile smile on his face.

"Captain!"

"Joy be with you, friend. Peace and contentment will fill you. You will know the peace of Landru…"

Then unguarded, alone, Kirk moved quietly to the door of the room with the manacle. The Lawgivers gave way as he passed. Spock stared after him, a horror only to be read by the absolute impassivity in his face.

He wasn't left much time to indulge it. Already they were manacling him to the wall. But the Vulcan's inveterate curiosity,

not to be subdued, was already subordinating this personal experience to interest in the control panel's mechanism. As with Kirk, the two shackling Lawgivers, as soon as their task was accomplished, left. Marplon threw a switch on his panel. The colored lights began to swirl. Spock watched their coiling flashes with interest.

"Show no surprise," Marplon said. "The effect is harmless."

Spock looked at Marplon. The Lawgiver spoke in a lowered voice. "My name is Marplon. I was too late to save your first two friends. They have been absorbed. Beware of them."

"And my Captain?"

"He is unharmed," said Marplon. "Unchanged." He moved a finger; the light glowed brighter, and the hum grew more shrill. Marplon left his console to release Spock from his manacle. "I am the third man in Reger's trio," he said. "We have been waiting for your return."

"We are not Archons, Marplon," Spock said.

"Whatever you call yourselves, you are in fulfillment of prophecy. We ask for your help."

Spock said, "Where is Reger?"

"He will join us. He is immune to the absorption. Hurry! Time is short."

"Who is Landru?"

Marplon recoiled. "I cannot answer your questions now."

"Why not?" Spock said.

"Landru! He will hear!" Marplon went swiftly to his console, and reaching down and inward, brought out the ship's company's phasers. Spock, seizing several of them, stowed them away. As the last phaser was secreted, two Lawgivers pushed the door open.

"It is done," Marplon told them.

Spock assumed the idiotically amiable look of the anointed. "Joy be with you," he said.

"Landru is all," said the Lawgivers in unison. Spock moved past them and into the corridor. Making his way back to the cell, he found Kirk there, smiling blankly into space. Two Lawgivers pushed past him to beckon to the security crewman who had not been treated. Ashen with fear, he rose and went with them.

Spock went to Kirk. "Captain…"

"Peace and tranquility to you, friend," Kirk said. Then, in a lowered voice, he added, "Spock, you all right?"

"Quite all right, sir. Be careful of Dr McCoy."

"I understand. Landru?"

"I am formulating an opinion, Captain."

"And?"

"Not here. The Doctor…"

But McCoy was already rising from his pallet, staring at them. His amiable smile faded and the look of curiosity on his face gave it a peculiar threatening aspect. "You speak in whispers," he said. "This is not the way of Landru."

"Joy to you, friend," Kirk said, "Tranquility be yours."

"And peace and harmony," intoned McCoy. "Are you of the Body?"

"The Body is one," Kirk said.

"Blessed be the Body. Health to all its parts." McCoy was smiling again, apparently satisfied. He sank back on the pallet; Kirk and Spock, joining him on theirs, sat on them in such a way as to screen their faces from McCoy. Then, in the same carefully lowered voice, he said, "What's your theory, Mr Spock?"

"This is a soulless society, Captain. It has no spirit, no spark. All is indeed peace and tranquility, the peace of the factory, the machine's tranquility… all parts working in unison."

"I've noticed that the routine is disturbed if something unexplained happens."

"Until new orders are received. The question is, who gives those orders?"

"Landru," Kirk said.

"There is no Landru," Spock said. "Not in the human sense."

"You're thinking the same way I am, Mr Spock."

"Yes, Captain. But as to what we must do…"

"We must pull out the plug, Mr Spock."

"Sir?"

"Landru must die."

Spock's left eyebrow lifted. "Our prime directive of non-interference," he began.

"That refers to a living, growing culture. I'm not convinced that this one can qualify as—" He broke off as the cell door opened. Marplon and Reger, carrying the confiscated communicators, entered. "It is the gift of Landru to you," Marplon said. The words were addressed to McCoy and the treated security guard. They smiled vacantly and McCoy said, "Joy to you, friends." He leaned

back against the stone wall, his eyes closed. Reger and Marplon hurried past him to Kirk and Spock.

"We brought your signaling devices," Marplon told Kirk. "You may need them."

"What we really need is more information about Landru," Kirk said.

Reger shrank back. "Prophecy says—" Marplon began.

"Never mind what prophecy says! If you want to be liberated from Landru, you have to help us!"

Spock cut in warningly. "Captain…"

McCoy was moving toward them, open and hostile suspicion in his face. "I heard you!" he cried. "You are not of the Body!" He hurled himself on Kirk, reaching for his throat. Spock tried to pry him off only to be taken in the rear by the treated security guard. "Lawgivers!" McCoy shouted. "Here are traitors! Traitors!"

With a twist, Kirk freed himself, crying, "Bones! Bones, I don't want to hurt you! Sit down and be still!"

But McCoy was still screaming, "Lawgivers! Hurry!"

Kirk's blow caught him squarely on the chin. As he fell, the door was flung wide and two Lawgivers, staffs ready, rushed in. At once they were jumped by Kirk and Spock. Kirk dropped his man with a hard wallop at the back of the neck while Spock applied the Vulcan neck pinch to his. Reger and Marplon, pressed against the wall, were staring at the fallen Lawgivers in horror.

Hurriedly, Kirk started disrobing the man he had downed. As Spock did the same to his, Kirk, donning the cowled garment, snapped at the others. "Where is Landru?"

"No," Marplon said. "No, no…"

"Where do we find him?" Kirk demanded.

"He will find us!" cried Reger. "He will destroy!"

Kirk whirled on Marplon. "You said you wanted a chance to help. All right, you're getting it! Where is he? You're a Lawgiver! Where do you see him?"

"We never see him. We hear him. In the Hall of Audiences!"

"In this building?"

Marplon nodded, terrified. Kirk let his rage rip. "You're going to take us there! Snap out of it, both of you! Start behaving like men!"

Spock opened a communicator. "Spock to *Enterprise.* Status report!"

"Mr Spock!" It was Scott's voice. "I've been trying to reach you!"

"Report, Mr Scott!"

"Orbit still decaying, sir. Give it six hours, more or less. Heat rays still on us. You've got to cut them off—or we'll cook one way or another."

Nodding at Spock, Kirk took the communicator. "Stand by, Mr Scott. We're doing what we can. How's Mr Sulu?"

"Peaceful enough, but he worries me."

"Put a guard on him."

"On Sulu?" Scott was shocked.

"That's an order! Watch him! Captain out!"

" Robed now and armed, Kirk and Spock turned to Marplon and Reger. "All right. Now about Landru…"

"He made us!" Marplon cried. "He made this world!"

Reger was on his knees. "Please. We have gone too far! Don't __"

Spock said, "You say Landru made this world. Explain."

"There was war… six thousand years ago there was war… and convulsion. The world was destroying itself. Landru was our leader. He saw the truth. He changed the world. He took us back, back to a simple time, of peace, of tranquility."

"What happened to him?" Kirk said.

"He still lives!" cried Marplon. "He is here now! He sees… he hears… we have destroyed ourselves… please, please, no more."

Kirk spoke very softly. "You said you wanted freedom. It is time you learned that freedom is not a gift. You have to earn it—or you don't get it. Come on! We're going to find Landru!"

Reger stumbled to bis knees. "No… no. I was wrong!" Wringing his hands, his eyes upturned imploringly, he shrieked, "I submit… I bare myself to the will of Landru."

Kirk seized his shoulder. "It is too late for that! But Reger, shaking himself loose, dashed to the door, screaming, "No! No! Lawgivers! Help me!" Spock, reaching out, gave him the neck pinch. He fell; Marplon, staring, slowly turned to meet Kirk's eyes.

"All right, my friend," Kirk said. "It's up to you now. Take us to Landru."

"He will strike us down," said Marplon.

"Maybe—or it might be the other way around. Mr Lindstrom, stay here and take care of Dr McCoy. Let's go, Mr Spock." He grabbed Marplon's arm, propelling him to the door. Dismay and

fear on his face, Marplon opened it, and Kirk's hand still on his arm, he moved out into the corridor. From under his hood, Kirk could see two robed Lawgivers approaching. They passed without so much as glancing at the three figures they assumed to be fellow Lawgivers. The trio moved on down the corridor and Kirk saw I that it ended at a large imposing door.

Marplon paused in front of it, visibly trembling. "This is… the Hall of Audiences," he whispered.

"Do you have a key?"

At Marplon's nod, Kirk said, "Open it."

"But—it is Landru…"

"Open it," Kirk said again. But he had to take the key from Marplon's trembling hands to open it himself. The Hall of Audiences was a large room, completely bare. In one of the walls was set a glowing panel. Marplon pointed to it "Landru—he speaks ere…" he whispered.

Kirk stepped forward. "Landru! We are the Archons!" he said. The moldy, cold silence in the big room remained unbroken. Kirk spoke again. "We are the Archons. We've come to talk with you!"

Very gradually the wise, impressive, benevolent face they remembered began to take shape on the panel. In an extremity of panic, Marplon broke into sobs, prostrating himself. "Landru comes!" he wept. "He comes!"

The noble figure was completed now, a warm half smile on its lips. They opened. "Despite my efforts not to harm you, you have invaded the Body. You are causing great harm."

"We have no intention of causing harm," Kirk said.

Landru continued as though Kirk had not spoken.

"Obliteration is necessary. The infection is strong. For the good of the Body, you must die. It is a great sorrow."

"We do not intend to die!"

The oblivious voice continued, kind, gently. "All who have seen you, who know of your presence, must be excised. The memory of the Body must be cleansed."

"Listen to me!" Kirk shouted.

"Captain… useless," Spock said. "A projection!"

"All right, Mr Spock! Let's have a look at the projector!"

They whipped out their phasers simultaneously, turning their beams on the glowing panel. There was a great flash of blinding light. The figure of Landru vanished and the light in the panel faded. But the real Landru had not disappeared. Behind the panel

he survived in row upon row of giant computers—a vast complex of dials, switches, involved circuits all quietly operating.

"It had to be," Kirk said. "Landru."

"Of course, Captain. A machine. This entire society is a machine's idea of perfection. Peace, harmony…"

"And no soul."

Suddenly the machine buzzed. A voice spoke. It said, "I am Landru. You have intruded."

"Pull out its plug, Mr Spock."

They aimed their phasers. But before they could fire, there came another buzzing from the machine and a flash of light immobilized their weapons. "Your devices have been neutralized," said the voice. "So it shall be with you. I am Landru."

"Landru died six thousand years ago," Kirk said.

"I am Landru!" cried the machine. "I am he. All that he was, I am. His experience, his knowledge—"

"But not his wisdom," Kirk said. "He may have programmed you, but he could not give you his soul."

"Your statement is irrelevant," said the voice. "You will be obliterated. The good of the Body is the primal essence."

"That's the answer, Captain," Spock said. "That good of the Body…"

Kirk nodded. "What is the good?" he asked.

"I am Landru."

"Landru is dead. You are a machine. A question has been put to you. Answer it!"

Circuits hummed. "The good is the harmonious continuation of the Body," said the voice. "The good is peace, tranquility, harmony. The good of the Body is the prime directive."

"I put it to you that you have disobeyed the prime directive—that you are harmful to the Body."

The circuits hummed louder. "The Body is… it exists. It is healthy."

"It is dying," Kirk said. "You are destroying it."

"Do you ask a question?" queried the voice.

"What have you done to do justice to the full potential of every individual of the Body?"

"Insufficient data. I am not programmed to answer that question."

"Then program yourself," Spock said. "Or are your circuits limited?"

"My circuits are unlimited. I will reprogram."

The machine buzzed roughly. A screech came from it. Marplon, on the floor, was getting to his feet, his eyes staring at the massive computer face. As he gained them, two more Lawgivers appeared, staffless.

They approached the machine. "Landru!" cried one. "Guide us! Landru?" His voice was a wail.

Kirk had whirled to cover them with his phaser when Spock raised his hand. "Not necessary, Captain. They have no guidance… possibly for the first time in their lives."

Kirk, lowering his phaser, turned back to the machine. "Landru! Answer that question!"

The voice had a metallic tone now. "Peace, order, and tranquility are maintained. The Body lives. But creativity is mine. Creativity is necessary for the health of the Body." It buzzed again. "This is impossible. It is a paradox. It shall be resolved."

Marplon spoke at last. "Is that truly Landru?"

"What's left of him," Spock said. "What's left of him after he built this machine and programmed it six thousand years ago."

Kirk addressed the machine. "Landru! The paradox!"

The humming fell dead. The voice, dully metallic now, said, "It will not resolve."

"You must create the good," Kirk said. That is the will of Landru —nothing else…"

"But there is evil," said the voice.

Then the evil must be destroyed. It is the prime directive. You are the evil."

The machine resumed its humming—a humming broken by hard, harsh clicks. Lights flashed wildly. "I think! I live!" said the machine.

"You say you are Landru!" Kirk shouted; "Then create the good! Destroy evil! Fulfill the prime directive!"

The hum rose to a roar. A drift of smoke waited up from a switch. Then a shower of sparks burst from the machine's metal face—and with the blast of exploding circuits, all its lights went out.

Kirk turned to the three awed Lawgivers. "All right, you can get rid of those robes now. If I were you, I'd start looking for real

jobs." He opened the communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Come in, please."

Scott's voice was loud with relief. "Captain, are you all right?"

"Never mind about us. What about you?"

The heat rays have gone, and Mr Sulu's back to normal."

"Excellent, Mr Scott. Stand by to beam-up landing party." He returned the communicator to Spock. "Let's see what the others are doing, Mr Spock. Mr Marplon can finish up here."

His command chair seemed to welcome Kirk. He'd never thought of it as comfortable before. But he stretched in it, hands locked behind his neck as Spock left his station to stand beside him while he dictated his last notation into his Captain's log. "Sociologist Lindstrom is remaining behind on Beta 3000 with a party of experts who will help restore the culture to a human form. Kirk out."

Spock spoke thoughtfully. "Still, Captain, the late Landru was a marvelous feat of engineering. Imagine a computer capable of directing—literally directing—every act of millions of human beings."

"But only a machine, Mr Spock. The original Landru programmed it with all his knowledge but he couldn't give it his wisdom, his compassion, his understanding—his soul, Mr Spock."

"Sometimes you are predictably metaphysical, Captain. I prefer the concrete, the graspable, the provable."

"You would make a splendid computer, Mr Spock."

Spock bowed. "That's very kind of you, sir."

Uhura spoke from behind them. "Captain… Mr Lindstrom from the surface."

Kirk pushed a button. "Yes, Mr Lindstrom."

"Just wanted to say good-bye, Captain."

"How are things going?"

"Couldn't be better!" The youngster's enthusiasm was like a triumphant shout in his ear. "Already this morning we've had half-a-dozen domestic quarrels and two genuine knock-down drag-outs. It may not be paradise—but it's certainly…"

"Human?" asked Kirk.

"Yes! And they're starting to think for themselves! Just give me and our people a few months and we'll have a going society on

our hands!”

“One question, Mr Lindstrom: Landru wanted to give his people peace and security and so programmed the machine. Then how do we account for so total an anomaly as the festival?”

“Sir, with the machine destroyed, we’ll never have enough data to answer that one with any confidence—but I have a guess, and I feel almost certain it’s the right one. Landru wanted to eliminate war, crime, disease, even personal dissension, and he succeeded. But he failed to allow for population control, and without that even an otherwise static society would soon suffer a declining standard of living, and eventual outright hunger. Clearly Landru wouldn’t have wanted that either, but he made no allowances for it.

“So the machine devised its own: one night a year in which all forms of control were shut off, every moral law abrogated; even ordinary human decency was canceled out. One night of the worst kind of civil war, in which *every* person is the enemy of *every* other. I have no proof of this at all, sir—but it’s just the sort of solution you’d expect from a machine, and furthermore, a machine that had been programmed to think of people as cells in a Body, of no importance at all as individuals.” Suddenly Lindstrom’s voice shook. “One night a year of total cancer… horrible! I hope I’m dead wrong, but there are precedents.”

“That can hardly be fairly characterized as a guess,” Spock said. “Ordinarily I do not expect close reasoning from sociologists, but from what I know of the way computers behave when they are given directives supported by insufficient data, I can find no flaw in Mr Lindstrom’s analysis. It should not distress him, for if it is valid—as I am convinced it is—he is indeed just the man to put it right.”

“Thank you, Mr Spock,” Lindstrom’s voice said. “I’ll cherish that. Captain, do you concur?”

“I do indeed,” Kirk said. “I have human misgivings which I know you share with me. All I can say now is it sounds promising. Good luck. Kirk out.”

Kirk turned to his First Officer and looked at him in silence for a long time. At last he said, “Mr Spock, if I didn’t know you were above such human weaknesses as feelings of solemnity, I’d say you looked solemn. Are you feeling solemn, Mr Spock?”

“I was merely meditating, sir. I was reflecting on the frequency with which mankind has wished for a world as peaceful and secure as the one Landru provided.”

“Quite so, Mr Spock. And see what happens when we get it! It’s our luck and our curse that we’re forced to grow, whether we like

it or not”

“I have heard human beings say also, Captain, that it is also our joy.”

“*Our* joy, Mr Spock?”

There was no response, but, Kirk thought, Spock knew as well as any man that ancient human motto: *Silence gives assent.*

A TASTE OF ARMAGEDDON

(Robert Hamner and Gene L. Coon)

Ambassador Fox was something of a cross to Captain Kirk, and to most of his officers, for that matter. In addition to having a very high regard for his own importance—which is not necessarily a handicap in a man, provided he also has a sense of humor—he had a remarkably short temper for a career diplomat.

But the mission was his, and he had to be put up with. There was no question about the importance of that. Eminiar VII was by all accounts the most advanced planet of its star cluster, NGC 321, having had space flight for hundreds of years. Nevertheless, as of fifty years ago they had never ventured beyond their own solar system, and for a very good reason: They had been at war with their nearest neighbor. The vessel making the report, the USS *Valiant*, was listed as missing—presumably as a product of the hostilities. It was Fox's job to establish diplomatic relations with them.

It evidently was not going to be easy. At first contact with the *Enterprise*, Eminiar VII sent Code 710—a warning not to approach the planet under any circumstances. Kirk was more than willing to comply; after all, it was their planet, and he intensely disliked gunboat diplomacy. But Ambassador Fox insisted, and he had command power if he wanted to exercise it. He frequently did.

Kirk beamed down to the planet with Mr Spock, Yeoman Manning and two security guards, leaving Scott, his engineer, in charge of the ship. In view of the warning, they all carried number-one phasers, in addition to a tricorder, of which Yeoman Manning was in charge.

But there was no overt hostility. They materialized in a corridor of a building that, judging by the traffic, was an official establishment of some kind, and were met solely by a very pretty girl who introduced herself as Mea Three and promptly offered to take them to the High Council. Her manner was cool, but correct.

The High Council proved to consist of four pleasant-looking men seated at a table in a large room that had in it also a faint hum of

machinery, though none was evident. As Kirk and his party entered, all four rose and smiled.

"I am Anan Seven," said the one farthest to the left. "I am sorry to see you here. But you are here, and we must do everything possible to make you comfortable. Won't you sit down?"

"I'm Captain Kirk, James T. Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*, representing the United Federation of Planets. This is my first officer, Mr Spock. Lieutenant Galloway. Lieutenant Osborne. Yeoman Manning."

"Welcome to Eminiar," Anan said, making a formal little bow. Everyone sat, and there was a moment of silence as each party studied the other.

"Well, Captain," Anan said at last, "since you chose to disregard our warning, I suppose we must proceed to the business at hand. What can we do for you?"

"Our mission, sir, is to establish diplomatic relations between your people and mine. The Federation badly needs a treaty port in this cluster."

"Impossible, I'm afraid," Anan said.

"Oh? Would you mind telling me why?"

"Because of the war."

"You are *still* at war?" Kirk said.

"We have been at war," Anan said, "for five hundred years."

Kirk raised his eyebrows. "You conceal it well. Mr Spock?"

"Sir," Spock said to Anan, "we have completely scanned your planet. We find it highly advanced, prosperous in a material sense, comfortable for your people—and completely peaceful. Seemingly an ideal, flourishing, highly civilized culture, which obviously should have ties with our Federation. There is no evidence of war whatsoever."

"Casualties among our civilian population," Anan said evenly, "total from one to three million dead each year, from direct enemy attack. This is why we warned you away, Captain. As long as your ship is orbiting this planet, it is in severe danger."

"With whom are you at war?" Spock said.

"Vendikar, the third planet in this system. Originally settled by our people, and as advanced as we are—and a ruthless enemy."

"Nevertheless?" Spock began. He got no further than that word. Suddenly the room was clamoring with a shrill, whooping siren. Anan, his face stern, stood instantly, pressing a button.

The result was astonishing. The siren stopped, but the entire rear wall of the Council room slid aside, revealing another room of the same size that harbored an installation of enormous intricacy. It was too big and too involved to take it all in at once; Kirk got a quick impression of a long bank of computers, a number of lighted graphs on the walls, a large illuminated grid that might have been a map.

"You will have to excuse us," Anan said. "We are in fact under attack at this moment. Mea, care for our guests."

All four of the council members took positions at the machinery, where several other operators were already at work. Kirk, baffled, looked first at Spock, who shrugged, and then at Mea.

"It will not last long," the girl said.

"Don't you take shelter?"

"There is no shelter, Captain."

"Are these attacks frequent?" Spock said.

"Oh, yes. But we retaliate promptly."

Beckoning to Spock, Kirk moved off into the newly revealed room—the war room, Kirk supposed. No attempt was made to stop them. At the large grid, an operator sat at a console. Flashes spattered over the grid, seemingly at random; at each flash, the operator pushed what was evidently a matching button. Kirk studied it, but it conveyed nothing to him; as he had expected, he could not read the mapping conventions of Eminiar. Beside Mm, however, Mea gasped suddenly.

"A hit!" she said. "A hit in the city!"

"Mr Spock, hear any explosions?"

"None. Yeoman Manning, are you getting any radiation readings or any other kind of disturbance on the tricorder?"

"Not a thing."

Kirk turned to Mea. "If this is an attack," he said, "would you mind telling me what weapons the enemy is using?"

"Fusion bombs," she said. "Materialized by transporter over the targets. They are very accurate. My parents were killed in the last attack."

Kirk flipped out his communicator and called the ship. "Mr Scott, are you still scanning this planet's surface?"

"Of course, sir," Scott's voice said promptly. "Per your orders."

"Anything unusual?"

"Nothing, sir. All quiet."

As Kirk put the communicator away, something buzzed on the boards before them and one of the computers extruded a card from a slot. Anan took it and stared at it, his face grim. Then he handed it to the man next to him.

"Just as it happened fifty years ago, Sar," he said.

Sar nodded, his face sad. "We warned them."

"Alert a security detachment. They may be needed."

"Sir," Kirk said, "I have been in contact with my ship, which has this entire planet under surveillance. All the time this so-called attack has been in progress, we have been monitoring you. There has been no attack—no explosions, no radiation, no disturbances whatsoever. Now if this is just some sort of game?"

"It is not a game," Anan said. "Half a million people have just been killed."

"Entirely by computers," Spock said suddenly.

"That's quite correct," Anan said. "Their deaths are registered. They are then given twenty-four hours to report to the disintegration chambers. Since the immediate danger appears to be over, I can explain at somewhat greater length. You must understand, Captain, that no two planets could carry on an all-out nuclear war for five hundred years. Such a war would not last five hundred hours. We were forced to find another solution."

"In other words," Spock said, "Vendikar's attack was a theoretical one."

"On the contrary, it was quite real. It is simply launched mathematically. If it is successful, the casualties are computed, identified, and ordered to report for disposition. Theoretical? I lost my wife in the last attack. It is sometimes hard—but our civilization lives. The people die, but the culture goes on."

"Do you mean to tell me," Kirk said, "that your people just? walk into a disintegrator when they're told to?"

"They do. They are at war and they know it."

"I've heard of some cold-blooded arrangements," Kirk said, "but this one takes the prize."

"It is cold-blooded," Spock agreed. "But it does have a certain logic about it."

"I am glad you approve," Anan said.

"I do not approve," Spock said coldly. "I understand, which is something else entirely."

"Good," Anan said. "Then you will recall that we warned you not to come here. You chose to disregard my warning. Once in orbit

around our planet, your ship became a legitimate target. It has been classified destroyed by an incoming missile."

He made a quick gesture. Kirk spun around. There were four very large uniformed men behind the *Enterprise* party. All four held unfamiliar but quite lethal-looking weapons.

"All persons aboard your ship have twenty-four hours to report to our disintegration chambers. To insure their cooperation, I am ordering you and your party held in custody against their surrender. The same thing, by the way, happened to your ship the *Valiant*, fifty years ago. Killed to the last man."

"You are not," Kirk said through his teeth, "going to harm my ship. Is that clear?"

"If possible, we shall spare the ship," Anan said. "But its passengers and crew are already dead. Put them in class-one detention."

"Class-one detention" proved to be comfortable—rather like a small, neat apartment, even to a well-stocked kitchen. This did not mollify anybody in the party in the slightest. They had not been there more than an hour when a guard let Mea in. The girl seemed subdued.

"I have been sent to ask if you require anything," she said.

"We require a great deal. I want to see Anan Seven."

"He is busy coordinating the casualty lists."

"If he won't talk to me," Kirk said, "he'll have more casualty lists than he knows what to do with."

"Captain, you have your duty to your ship," the girl said quietly. "We have our duty to our planet."

"Your duty doesn't include stepping into a disintegrator and disappearing!"

"I'm afraid it does, Captain," she said, just as quietly as before. "I too have been declared a casualty. I must report to a disintegrator at noon tomorrow."

Kirk stared at her. He still found the whole arrangement impossible to believe. "And you're going to do it? What could Anan and Sar and the others possibly do if you all just refused to show up?"

"It's not a question of what the Council would do," Mea said. "If everybody refused to report, Vendikar would have no choice but to launch real weapons—and we would have to do the same. Within

a week, there would be nothing left of either civilization. Both planets would be uninhabitable. Surely you can see that ours is the better way."

"No," Kirk said. "I don't see it at all."

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can bring you?"

"Yes. Anan Seven."

"I'll convey the message. But I doubt that he'll come."

As she left, Kirk pounded a fist into a palm in frustration. Then, suddenly, he had an idea. "Mr Spock!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Vulcans have limited telepathic abilities, don't they?"

"Yes, Captain," Spock said. "But remember that I am only half Vulcan. I could not reach Anan from here—and if I could, I would not be able to transmit a complex message, or pick one up."

"That isn't what I had in mind. I just want to plant a suspicion in that guard outside. Preferably, that we've cut a hole through the wall with some heat device they overlooked. Or if that's too complex, just a feeling that we're getting away."

"Hmm," Spock said. "I know nothing about the sensitiveness of the Eminians. However, nothing would be lost by trying."

"Good. Go ahead."

Spock nodded, leaned his head against the wall nearest the corridor, and closed his eyes. His brow furrowed, and within a few moments he was sweating. Even to Kirk, to whom telepathy was a closed book, it was clear that his first officer was working hard.

Nothing seemed to happen for at least five centuries, or maybe six. Then there was a faint humming at the door, followed by a click. Kirk flattened his back against the wall.

The door swung open and the guard charged in, weapon at the ready. Kirk rewarded him with a crushing blow at the back of the neck; he dropped in complete silence. Kirk dragged him away from the door, retrieving his weapon.

"Thank you, Mr Spock."

"A pleasure, Captain."

"Now, we've got to get our communicators back, and get in touch with the ship. I don't know how far we'll get without weapons; we'll need more. Mr Spock, I know how you feel about taking life. But our ship is in danger. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly, Captain. I shall do what is necessary."

Kirk clapped him quickly on the back. "Let's go."

They were perhaps halfway back to the Council chambers when they turned a corner and found themselves on the end of a queue. Kirk signaled a halt and peered ahead.

At the other end of the line was a large enclosed booth, with a control console on one side at which an armed guard was sitting, watching a light over the machine. Presently this went off, and in response to the touch of a control, a door opened in the side of the machine.

The man at the head of the line took a last look around and stepped inside. The door closed. The machine hummed; the light went on, and then off again. The door slid back.

There was nobody inside.

Kirk and Spock exchanged grim looks. Kirk made a pinching motion with one hand, and Spock nodded. Kirk walked rapidly down the side of the queue opposite the side the console and the guard were on.

"All right, break it up," he said. "Stand back, everybody."

Heads turned. The guard half rose. "Just what do you think you're up to?" Then he saw Kirk's stolen weapon.

He had courage. Kirk could have shot him easily and he must have known it, but he went for his own gun anyhow. At the same instant Spock, who had scuttled unnoticed down the other side of the line, caught him from behind with his nerve-pinch to the shoulder. Looking astonished, the guard collapsed. Spock scooped up his weapon.

"Excellent, Mr Spock. The rest of you people, stand back or you'll get hurt."

Kirk leveled his gun at the disintegration booth and pulled the trigger. The results were most satisfying. Nothing seemed to come out of the weapon but a scream of sound, but a huge hole appeared magically in the machine. Sparks flew from the console, and in a moment the booth was in flames.

"All right, now get out of here!" Kirk roared. "Go to your homes and stay there! Go!"

Terrified, the remaining people in the queue turned and ran. Spock joined the Captain, eyeing the gun he had just confiscated with open curiosity, his eyebrows up. "A fascinating weapon. Is it solely sonic, I wonder? If so, how do they keep it in a tight beam?"

"We'll work that out later. Let's get out of here."

There was nobody in the Council room but Anan when they burst in. He was pouring something into a glass from a small bottle. He froze when he saw them, then smoothly resumed the motion and drank.

"Would you care to join me, Captain? You may find our Trova most interesting."

"I didn't come to drink."

Anan nodded toward the weapon in Kirk's hand. "I assume that is what you used to destroy disintegration chamber number twelve."

"Yes. A most efficient weapon—and I'm not at all chary of using it."

"That much is obvious," Anan said. "Clearly you are a barbarian."

"*I* am?" Kirk said incredulously.

"Quite. Why not? We all are. Surely in your history too, you were a killer first, a builder second. That is our joint heritage."

"We are a little less cold-blooded about it than you are."

"What does that matter to the dead?" Anan said.

"You have a point. Nevertheless, I don't think you realize the risk you're taking. We don't make war with computers and herd the casualties off to suicide stations. We make the real thing. I could destroy this planet of yours, Councilman. Mr Spock, Yeoman Manning, see if you can find one of our communicators in this place."

"I already have," Spock said. He handed it over. Anan watched warily.

"Captain," he said, "surely you see the position we are in. If your people do not report to the disintegration chambers, it is a violation of an agreement dating back five hundred years."

"My people are not responsible for your agreements."

"You are an officer of a force charged with keeping the peace," Anan said. He seemed almost to be pleading. "Yet you will be responsible for an escalation that could destroy two worlds. Millions of people horribly killed, complete destruction of our culture and Vendikar's. Disaster, disease, starvation, pain, suffering, lingering death?"

"They seem to frighten you," Kirk said grimly.

"They frighten any sane man!"

"Quite so."

"Don't you see?" Anan said desperately. "We've done away with all that! Now you threaten to bring it all down on us again. Do those four hundred people of yours mean more than the hundreds of millions of innocent people on Eminiar and Vendikar? What kind of a monster are you?"

"I'm a barbarian," Kirk said. Nevertheless, this was indeed a nasty impasse. After a moment, he activated the communicator.

"Mr Scott? Kirk here."

"Captain! We thought they'd got you."

"They thought so too," Kirk said. "What's the situation up there?"

"It's been lively," Scott's voice said. "First they tried to lure us all down with a fake message from you. Luckily, our computer told us the voice-patterns didn't match, though it was a bonny imitation—you'd have enjoyed it. Then they sent us their ultimatum. I dinna have any such orders and I paid no attention."

"Good for you. Then what?"

"When the deadline was past, they opened fire on the *Enterprise*. Of course, after the ultimatum we had our screens up. I wanted to bounce a couple of dozen photon torpedoes off them for a starter—after all, the time was past when they said they were going to kill all of you—but Ambassador Fox wouldna let me. Then he wanted me to let down the screens so he could beam down to the planet and try to patch things up, and I wouldna do *that*. Now the haggis is really in the fire as far as he's concerned."

"Scotty, your decisions were entirely proper, and I'll back them to the hilt. I'm going to try to straighten this mess out down here. There's a good chance that I won't succeed. If you don't hear anything to the contrary from me in forty-eight hours, execute General Order Twenty-Four."

"Twenty-Four? But, Captain?" There was a long pause. Then Scott's voice said: "In forty-eight hours. Aye, sir. Good luck."

"Thanks. Kirk out."

"And just what," Anan asked, "does that mean?"

"It means that in forty-eight hours, the *Enterprise* will destroy Eminiar Seven."

"You're bluffing. You wouldn't."

"I didn't start this, Councilman," Kirk said. "But I mean to finish it. Now?"

He moved to the table and pushed the button he had seen Anan use earlier. The wall slid aside as before, revealing the war room.

"Mr Spock, see if you can figure that installation out. Anan, you still have something to learn. Destruction. Disease. Suffering. Horror. That's what war is supposed to be, Anan. *That's what makes it a thing to be avoided*. But you've made war neat and painless—so neat and painless that you had no reason to put a stop to it. That's why you've been carrying it on for five hundred years. Any luck, Mr Spock?"

"Yes, sir," the first officer said. "I cannot read the big map, but the rest of it seems to be quite straightforward. This unit controls the disintegrator booths; these the attacking devices; this the defense. And these compute the casualties. They are all tied in with a subspace transmission unit, apparently so they are in constant contact with their Vendikan counterparts."

"Is that essential?"

"I would think so, Captain. The minute contact is broken; it would be tantamount to an abrogation of the entire agreement between the two warring parties."

"What are you talking about?" Anan said, in dawning horror.

"This is the key, Captain," Spock said, pointing to an isolated computer. He threw a switch on it, and then another. "The circuit is locked. Destroy this one, and they will all go."

"Good. Stand back. You too, Anan." He raised the stolen disrupter.

"No!" Anan screamed. "No, please?"

Kirk fired. The key computer burst. A string of minor explosions seemed to run from it along the main computer bank—and then they were no longer minor. Hastily, Kirk herded everyone out into the corridor. They huddled against the wall, while the floor shook, and billows of smoke surged out of the door of the Council room.

It took a long time. At last, Kirk said, "Well—that's it"

"Do you realize what you've done?" Anan screamed.

"Perfectly. I've given you back the horrors of war. The Vendikans will now assume that you have abandoned your agreement, and will prepare for a real war, with real weapons. The next attack they launch will do a lot more than count up numbers on a computer. It will destroy your cities, devastate your planet. You'll want to retaliate, of course. If I were you I'd start making bombs."

"You *are* a monster," Anan whispered.

Kirk ignored him. "Yes, Councilman, you've got a real war on your hands. You can either wage it—with real weapons—or you might consider the alternative."

"There is no alternative."

"There is," Kirk said harshly. "Make peace."

"After five hundred years of casualties? You're mad!"

"Maybe. But we too have killed in the past, as you pointed out a while ago. Nevertheless, we can stop. We can admit we have been killers—but we're not going to kill today. That's all it takes; one simple decision. We are not going to kill today."

Anan put a shaking hand to his forehead. "I don't know? I can't see?"

"We'll help you." He raised the communicator. "Scotty, have you and Ambassador Fox been following this conversation? I left the line open for you."

"Aye, that we have."

"Then you can beam the Ambassador down here if you want."

After a moment, there was a shimmer in the chamber, and Fox materialized, looking portly and confused.

"This is what you do," Kirk told Anan. "Contact Vendikar. I think you'll find that they're just as terrified and appalled as you are at the prospects. They'll do anything to avoid the alternative I've just given you; peace—or utter destruction. It's up to you."

Anan looked at them all, hope fighting with despair on his face. Ambassador Fox stepped forward.

"Councilman," he said, "as a third party, interested only in peace and the establishment of normal relations, I will be glad to offer my services as a negotiator between you and Vendikar. I have had some small experience in these matters."

Anan took a step toward him. "Perhaps," he muttered. "Perhaps there may be time. I have a direct channel to the Vendikar High Council. It hasn't been used in centuries."

"Then it's long overdue," the Ambassador said. "If you'll be so kind as to lead the way?"

Anan started hesitantly down the corridor, his steps beginning to regain their springiness. Fox followed closely. Anan said, "I understand the head of the Vendikar Council—his name is Ripoma—is an intelligent man. And if he hears from a disinterested party like yourself?"

His voice became unintelligible as they rounded a corner. The rest of the *Enterprise* party watched them go.

"There is a chance it will work, Captain," Spock said. "Much depends upon the approach and the conduct of the negotiations, of course."

"Annoying though he is, Ambassador Fox has a reputation for being good at his job," Kirk said. "I'm glad he's going to be good for something at last." He raised the communicator once more. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Cancel General Order Twenty-Four. Alert transporter room. Ready to beam up in ten minutes."

"Aye, sir."

"Still, Captain," Spock said, "you took a very big chance."

"Did I, Mr Spock? They were killing three million people a year—and it had gone on for five hundred years. An actual attack might not have killed any more people than the fifteen hundred million they've already killed in their computer attacks—but it would have destroyed their ability to make war. The fighting would be over. Permanently."

"I would not care to have counted on that," Spock said.

"I wasn't, Mr Spock. It was only a calculated risk. What I was really counting upon was that the Eminians keep a very orderly society—and actual war is very messy. Very, very messy. I had a feeling they'd do anything to avoid it—even talk peace!"

"A feeling, Captain? Intuition?"

"No," Kirk said. "Call it? shall we say, cultural morphology?"

If Spock had any answer, it was lost in the shimmer of the transporter effect.

SPACE SEED

(Carey Wilber and Gene L. Coon)

It was only sheer luck that Maria McGivers was on the bridge when the SOS came in. Officially, Lieutenant McGivers was a controls systems specialist, but on the side, she was also a historian. Probably nobody else on board the *Enterprise* would have recognized Morse code at all, since it had gone out of use around the year 2000, in the general chaos following the Eugenics Wars; but she was a student of the period (though, Kirk thought, she looked a good deal more like a ballerina).

The SOS, when answered, changed promptly to the Morse for SS *Botany Bay*, and stayed there as if stuck regardless of further hails. Homing on the message, the *Enterprise* eventually found herself drawing alongside a dark hull of a ship of the CZ-100 class. The library computer said the last one of those had been built around 1994. Clearly a derelict, its signal left on automatic.

Except that the *Enterprise's* sensors showed other equipment also still operating, over there across the vacuum between the two vessels. Other equipment—and heartbeats. They were very faint, but they seemed to be coming from some eighty or ninety sources. None were faster than four beats per minute. There were no signs of respiration.

"Aliens?" Kirk asked McCoy.

The surgeon shrugged. "You've got me, Jim. Even aliens have to breathe. Besides, the ship's name is in English."

"The English," Kirk said drily, "were notorious for not breathing, I suppose. Mr Spock, can you trace the registry?"

"Nothing in the computer, Captain."

"Lieutenant McGivers, what can you tell us about the period when that ship was built?"

"Not as much as I'd like," Marla McGivers said. "The Eugenics Wars were caused by a group of ambitious scientists—of all nationalities—who were trying to improve the race by selective breeding. They were pretty ruthless about it, and before their

identity was guessed, half the countries on Earth were accusing each other of being responsible for the plague of sports and monsters that was cropping up. The result was the last World War, and in the process, a lot of records were lost. I'm surprised that any ship from that era ever got off the ground."

"Well, we'd better go across and look it over," Kirk said. "Since you're a specialist in the period, you'd better be in the party. Scotty, I'll want you to inspect the machinery and see what's salvageable, if anything. Bones, you too."

"Why am I always included in these things?" McCoy complained. "I signed aboard to practice medicine, not to have my atoms scattered back and forth across space by a transporter."

"You're included because we hear heartbeats, and that is your department. Let's go."

It was almost dark inside the *Botany Bay*. Where the boarding party materialized, there was little to see but a long corridor, flanked on each side by row upon row of coffin-like drawers or canisters, each about two meters square on end, thrust into the wall. Each had a small green light blinking over it, producing eerie, confusing reflections. Kirk eyed them.

"Mr Scott?"

"I don't make anything of it yet, sir. They look a little like food lockers—but why so many? Ah, there's a control panel."

"I've seen something like them," Marla said. "Or rather, drawings of them. They look like a twentieth-century life-support system."

McCoy applied his tricorder to the nearest cabinet. At the same moment, Scott said, "Ah, here we are!" and lights came on overhead. McCoy grunted with interest.

"Look here, Jim," he said. "A new reading. The lights seem to have triggered something inside."

Kirk did not have to look at the tricorder reading to see that. There was now a clear hum from the cabinet, and the little light had turned from green to red.

"I've got it!" Marla said suddenly. "It's a sleeper ship!"

This meant nothing to Kirk, but McCoy said: "Suspended animation?"

"Yes. They were necessary for long space trips until about the year 2018. They didn't have the warp drive until then, so even

interplanetary travel took them years. We'll find crewmen in there, or passengers, sleeping, waiting for the end of their journey?"

"Or more likely, all dead," McCoy said. "On the other hand, those heartbeats? Is it possible, after all these centuries?"

Scott joined them, and in a moment had discovered that the front of the cabinet was actually a protective shield. Pulling this away, he revealed a transparent observation panel. On the other side, bathed in a gentle violet glow, was a motionless, naked man. He was extremely handsome, and magnificently built. His face reflected the sun-ripened Aryan blood of the northern Indian Sikhs, with just an additional suggestion of the oriental. Even in repose, his features suggested strength, intelligence, even arrogance.

"How beautiful," Marla said, as if to herself.

"This cabinet is wired to be triggered first," Scott said practically. "Maybe that means he's the leader."

"Or only a pilot," Spock added. "Or a doctor, to supervise the revival of the others."

"He's the leader," Marla said positively.

"Oh?" Kirk said. "What makes you think so?"

"Well? you can see it. A Sikh type. They were fantastic warriors."

"He *is* reviving," McCoy said. "Heartbeat up to fifty-two already, and definite breathing."

"Scotty, see if they're all like that."

The engineer went down the line, pulling off the shields and peering into each canister. "No sir," he said finally. "A mixed bag, Captain. Western, Mid-European, Near-Eastern, Latin, Oriental—the works. And all their lights are still green, as you can see yourself."

"A man from the twentieth century," Marla said, as if hypnotized. "Coming alive now. It's incredible!"

"It's about to be impossible," McCoy said, checking the tricorder again. "His heartbeat's beginning to drop back down. If you want to talk to this living fossil, Jim, I suggest we get him over to my sick bay right away quick."

"Oh no!" Marla said.

McCoy shot her a sidelong look, but he said, "I quite agree. A patient well worth fighting for. And think of the history locked up in that head!"

"Never mind the history," Kirk said. "It's a human life. Beam him over."

While McCoy worked on the sleeping man, Kirk took time out to collect more information from his officers.

"As near as I can work out their heading," said Spinelli, who had relieved Sulu at the helm, "they must have been trying for the Tau Ceti system."

"Makes sense. It's near Sol, and there are three habitable planets."

"Yes sir, but they would never have gotten there. Their port control jets took meteor damage, and the hits put them off course, too."

"Scotty, any log books or records?"

"Negative, Captain. They must have been in suspended animation when the ship took off."

"Ship's equipment?"

"Colonization gear mainly," the engineer said. "But quite heavy on armaments. I suppose that's typical of their era. Twelve of the life support systems malfunctioned, leaving seventy-two still operating. About a dozen of those are women."

"Seventy-two alive," Kirk said reflectively. "Any conclusions, Mr Spock?"

"Very few, Captain. The CZ-100 class vessel was built for interplanetary travel only—*not* interstellar."

"They tried it."

"Granted," said the first officer. "But why?"

"Possibly because life on Earth had become so unbearable during the wars."

"Captain, consider the expense, just to begin with. Healthy, well-oriented young humans would think of some less costly way of surviving—or of committing suicide. It was ten thousand to one against their making it to Tau Ceti, and they must have known it. And another thing: Why no record of the attempt? Granted that the records are incomplete, but a maiden star voyage—the name *Botany Bay* should have been recorded a thousand times; one mention, at least, should have survived. But there is nothing."

"*Botany Bay*. Hmm. Lieutenant McGivers tells me that was a penal colony on the shores of Australia. Is that of some significance?"

"Are you suggesting a deportation vessel?" Spock said. "Again, logically insufficient. Your Earth was on the edge of another Dark

Ages. Whole populations were being bombed out of existence. A group of criminals could have been eliminated in a far less expensive way than firing them off in what was the most advanced spaceship of its time."

"So much for my theory. I'm still waiting for yours."

"I do not have the facts, Captain. William of Occam said that one must not multiply guesses without sufficient reasons. I suggest that we take the *Botany Bay* to the nearest Star Base for a thorough study."

Kirk thought about it. "All right. Rig tractors for towing. In the meantime, I'm going to look at the patient."

In the sick bay, the man out of time was still unconscious, but now breathing regularly. Marla McGivers was standing to one side, watching.

"How is he, Bones?"

"By all rights he should be dead," McCoy said shortly.

"False modesty?"

"By no means. I'm good, but not *that* good. His heart stopped three times. When I got it going the third time,, he woke up for a moment, smiled at me, and said 'How long?' I guessed a couple of centuries. He smiled again, fell asleep, and damned if his heart didn't stop a fourth time, and *start up again of its own accord*. There's something inside this man that refuses to accept death."

"He must have the constitution of an ox."

"That is not just a metaphor," McCoy said, pointing to the body function panel. "Look at that. Even in his present shape, his heart valve action has twice the power of yours or mine. Lung efficiency, fifty percent better. And courage!? Whoever he is, or whatever, it'll be a pleasure to meet him."

Kirk looked at Marla, and then said quietly to the surgeon, "I can get you agreement on that."

Apparently encouraged by the notice, Marla said, "Will he live?"

"If he gets some rest, he may," McCoy said tartly. "Beat it, both of you. This is a sick bay, not a wardroom."

Grinning, Kirk motioned Marla out and followed her. As she turned down the corridor, however, he said, "Lieutenant."

She stopped and turned. Kirk went on. "Lieutenant, if I were forced to rate your performance as a member of the boarding party today, I wouldn't give you a very high mark."

"I know, Captain," she said. "I'm sorry."

"That's not enough. At any one time, the safety of this entire vessel can rest upon the performance of a single crewman. The fact that you may find a strange man personally compelling is the worst possible excuse."

"Personally?" she said, flushing. "Captain, my second profession is history. To find a? a specimen from the past, alive? the sheer delight of anticipating what he might tell me?"

"More than that," Kirk said. "Men were much more adventurous then, bolder, more colorful."

She was silent for no more than a heartbeat. Then she said firmly, "Yes, sir, I think they were."

Kirk nodded. "That's better. If I can have honesty, I'll overlook mistakes—at least the first time. Dismissed."

As she left, Kirk turned to find McCoy watching him, smiling. "It's a pity," the surgeon said, "that you wasted your life on command, Jim. You'd have made a fair psychologist."

"Thanks, Bones, but command is better. It covers every other subject."

"Touché—or should I say, checkmate?"

It was only a few hours later that McCoy called Kirk on the bridge. "Captain," he said, "I have a patient with questions—and I don't mind telling you, patients like this could put medicine out of business. Can you come down?"

The big man from the *Botany Bay*, now dressed in a tunic from the stores of the *Enterprise*, was still on his bed; but he was indeed awake—vitally awake. Kirk introduced himself.

"Thank you," the man said. "I am told I have slept for two centuries or more, and am on board a real starship—not a makeshift like mine. What is our heading?"

Kirk was both amused and annoyed. "Would you care to give your name first?"

"No, I would not. I have a responsibility. If you are indeed a commander, you will recognize it. Where are we going?"

Kirk decided to yield for the moment; there was no point in insisting on a contest with a man just yanked back from the edge of death, no matter how arrogant he was. "Our heading is Star Base Twelve, our command base in this sector."

"Which is?"

"I doubt that identifying the sector would do you any good. It is many parsecs beyond the system you were headed for, and our galactic coordinate system probably doesn't correspond with the one you're used to."

"Galactic," the man said. "I see. And my people?"

"Seventy-two of the canisters are still functioning. The people will be revived when we reach Star Base Twelve. We wanted to see how we fared with reviving you, first."

"Logical and hard-headed; I approve. I do begin to grow fatigued. Can we continue the questioning at another time?"

"You haven't answered any questions yet," Kirk said, "except by inference."

"I apologize," the big man said at once. "My name is, Kahn. I command the *Botany Bay* Colonizing Expedition. I think perhaps I could answer your questions better if I knew your period, your terminology and so on—perhaps something to read during my convalescence would serve. History, technology, whatever is available."

It seemed a sensible request. "Dr McCoy will show you how to hook your viewing screen here into our library tapes. And I think Lieutenant McGivers would enjoy filling you in on the history."

"Very good." Kahn smiled. "I have two hundred years of catching up to do. I?"

Suddenly, his eyes closed. McCoy looked at the body function panel.

"Asleep," McCoy said. "Well, I'm glad he's got some human weaknesses."

It was not until Kirk was on his way back to the bridge that he fully realized how little Kahn had told him. Irritated, mostly at himself, he collared Spock at the computer. "Anything?"

"Nothing about a star flight until the Alpha Centauri expedition of 2018," the first officer said. "How is the patient?"

"Arrogant—and clever. Enormously powerful. And with enormous magnetism. Not at all what I expected in a twentieth-century man."

"Interesting. Possibly a product of selective breeding."

"That had occurred to me," Kirk admitted. "If I wanted a superman, he's very much the kind of outcome I'd shoot for."

"Exactly, Captain. He is almost a stereotype of an Earthman's dreams of power and potency. And from what I can put together

from the fragments of the record, just the kind of man who precipitated the chaos of the 1990s."

"Oh? I thought it was a group of scientists."

"Partly true," Spock said, "and partly, I would judge, a comfortable fiction. The scientists encouraged carefully arranged marriages *among themselves*, and applied their knowledge of heredity to their *own* offspring. The sports and monsters did not appear until after the war was well started, and almost surely were spontaneous mutations erupting from all the ambient radioactivity. The scientists stayed aloof and went right on breeding what they thought was *Homo superior*."

"Fact?" Kirk demanded. "Or just that old legend of the mad scientists again?"

"Mostly deduction," Spock said. "But the scientists existed. Not mad—not raving mad, anyhow. Dedicated men who believed their wards would grow up to seize power peaceably, put an end to war, famine, greed—a noble ambition, which of course misfired."

"And our patient?"

"One of those children. His age would be right. A group of aggressive, arrogant young men *did* seize power simultaneously in over forty nations. But they had overextended themselves; they could not hold what they seized. That much is fact. And one more thing, Captain. Are you aware that some eighty or ninety of those people were never brought to trial, were never even found after the chaos? No bodies, no graves, no traces?"

"I certainly wasn't," Kirk said.

"And they should have been found, or the authorities should have pretended that they had been found. Think of the panic among the remaining, starving war-weary people even to suspect that eighty Napoleons might still be alive. And, Captain?"

"Yes," Kirk said heavily. "I'm no match for you as a logician, Mr Spock, but even I can see where that sentence is leading. You think those eighty Napoleons are *still* alive—and we have seventy-nine of them in tow, and one on board."

"Precisely, Captain."

Kirk thought about it for quite a while.

"It stands up," he said. "But what we're left with, is that we can get no more pertinent information anywhere except from Kahn himself. He's got a mind like a tantalum-lined vault, so we'll never force it out of him. We'll have to try to charm it? which probably won't work either. Maybe we can use the customs of his own time to disarm him. I'll see what Lieutenant McGivers has to suggest."

What Marla McGivers had to suggest was a formal dinner, attended by all the major officers of the *Enterprise*, as a welcome for Commander Kahn to the twenty-third century. She was obviously far from disinterested in the proposal, and Kirk suspected that Kahn had already made his first new conquest in the new century; but there were no regulations against romance, and in any event, Kirk had nothing better to suggest.

Marla appeared with a new and totally anachronistic hair style which went a long way toward confirming Kirk's suspicions. As for Kahn, it was impossible to tell whether or not he was charmed; he far too efficiently charmed everybody else, instead. There seemed to be no situation in which he could not feel at home, after only a few minutes' appraisal.

Then, over the brandy, it suddenly turned out at least one officer of the *Enterprise* was not prepared to recognize charm even if he were hit over the head with it. Spock said, "But you still have not told us why you decided on star travel, Commander Kahn—nor how you managed to keep it out of the records."

"Adventure, Mr Spock. There was little else left to be accomplished on Earth."

"There was the overthrow of the Eugenics tyrannies," Spock said. "Many men considered that a worthwhile effort."

"A waste of spirit in a desert of shame," Kahn said. "There was much that was noble about the Eugenics crusade. It was the last grand attempt to unify humanity, at least in my time."

"Like a team of horses under one harness, one whip?"

"I refuse to take offense, Mr Spock," Kahn said genially. "Much can be accomplished by a team. It was a time of great dreams—great aspirations."

"Great aspirations under petty dictatorships? Never in previous history, at least."

"I disagree," Kahn said. "One man, not many, would eventually have ruled. As in Rome under Augustus—and see what that accomplished—Captain Kirk, you understand me well. You let your second-in-command attack me, and through me, you; yet you remain silent, and watch for weakness. A sound principle."

"You have a tendency," Kirk said, "to express your ideas in military terms, Commander Kahn. This is a social occasion."

"It has been said," Kahn said easily, "that social occasions are only warfare concealed. Many prefer their warfare more honest

and open."

"There was open warfare on Earth," Kirk said. "Yet it appears that you fled it."

"Not much can be done with a nearly destroyed world."

"In short," Spock said, "you were afraid."

Kahn's eyes flashed. "I have never been afraid."

"And that does not frighten you?"

"How? I don't understand you, Mr Spock. How can a man be afraid of never being afraid? It is a contradiction in terms."

"Not at all," the first officer said. "It is a null class in the class of all classes not members of the given class."

Kahn was now beginning to look angry. Kirk, secretly a little amused, interposed. "I'm sorry, Commander, but you just pushed Mr Spock's logic button, which has a tendency to make him incomprehensible for the next ten minutes or so. Nevertheless, I think his question a good one. You say you have never been afraid; yet you left at the very time mankind most needed courage."

"Courage! How can one impart courage to sheep? I offered the world order. *Order!* And what happened? They panicked. I left behind nothing worth saving."

"Then," Spock said, "do you imagine that this ship, to take a simple example, was built by sheep, out of panic? I do not further impugn your logic, Commander Kahn, but I am beginning to mistrust your eyesight."

Marla, who had been completely silent since the start of the discussion, stood up so suddenly that coffee slopped in saucers all the way around the table.

"I never thought," she said in a trembling voice, "that I'd ever see so much rudeness to a starship guest."

"Was *I* rude?" Spock said mildly, raising his eyebrows. "If so, I apologize."

"And I," said Kirk, repressing another grin.

"I quite accept your apologies," Kahn said, also rising. "But if you will excuse me, gentlemen and ladies, I am tired. It has been a good many centuries, and I would like to return to my quarters. If you would guide me back, Marla??"

They went out, followed, at a slight motion of the head from Kirk, by every other guest but Spock. When the room was empty, Kirk said, "And McCoy calls *me* a fair psychologist! I've never seen a better needling job in my life, Mr Spock."

"I myself am not very happy with it, Captain," the first officer said. "The human half of my make-up seems to go to sleep just when I need it most. Consider, really, how little we have learned. The man's name: Sibahl Khan Noonien. From 1992 through 1996, military chieftain of a quarter of your world from South Asia through the Middle East, and the last of the tyrants to be overthrown. And apparently very much admired, as such men go; there was very little freedom under his rule, but also there were no massacres, and no war until he was attacked by a lesser dictator of his own breed. A man of power, who understands the uses of power, and who *should* have been much admired by the people whom he calls sheep, the people who feel more comfortable being led."

"And you got all that just from what he said tonight? I would say that's considerable."

"It is not what we need to know," Spock insisted. "The main question is, why did he run away? *That* was what I was hoping to elicit from him. But he caught me at it. I do not call that very good psychology."

"I see what you mean," Kirk said reflectively. "Until we know that, we can't know what he might intend now—or what risks we might run in reviving the other seventy or so of them. We will just have to try another gambit? But there's one other thing. What was the point of that question about being afraid of never having been afraid? I thought for a moment that I saw what you were driving at, and then you lost me in your logical technicalities. Isn't the question what you would call a tautology?"

"No, Captain," Spock said. "But I was trying to make it look like one. I was not trying to confuse you, certainly, but Commander Kahn—and I hope that at least there, I succeeded. Fear is an essential reaction to the survival of any sentient creature. If he does not know fear, he never knows when it is sensible to run; and yet, Commander Kahn ran. Since he claims never to have felt fear, what other reason can he have had?"

"Hmm," Kirk said. "I've never seen a single sentient creature that didn't feel fear when it was appropriate. Yet he was very convincing on that very point."

"Indeed he was," Spock said. "And, Captain—that *scares* me."

Nothing Spock had ever said before had quite so stunned Kirk. As he stared at his Science Officer, the vacated, somehow sadly messy scene of the formal dinner suddenly rang with the alarm to General Quarters.

"Abrams in Security, Captain. Kahn's missing."

"McCoy here. Kahn's not here. No sign of McGivers, either—not even in her quarters. And he's not there."

"Transporter room here. We've had a guard slugged, Lieutenant Adamski is missing, and there's been a lot of power expended in the last half hour."

"Scott reporting. I?"

"Uhura, what happened to Scotty? Get him back!"

"Dead channel, Captain. I can't raise the arsenal, either."

"Spock, send somebody down."

"All turbo elevators inoperative. Emergency exits jammed."

The lights began to go down. "Batteries!"

"Shunted out, Captain. Also, the atmosphere's off."

"Engineering! Scott! What's going on down there? Scotty!"

And then they heard Kahn's voice. It was coming through Uhura's own board, though it was impossible to imagine how Kahn had made the crippled array speak.

"He's not able to talk with you at the moment, Captain," Kahn said. "I'm afraid your ship is mine—or rather, ours. I have almost all my people aboard her, at every key point. Everything is jammed; you have perhaps ten minutes before you suffocate. Would you like to negotiate with me?"

"Uhura, can you raise Star Ship Command?"

"No, sir, this board is a dead duck. I can't even dump a message capsule."

"Brilliant," Spock said softly.

There was only one thing left to do. "Security Five, Mr Spock. Flood all decks."

"Bypassed, Captain. Commander Kahn seems to have been a very quick student."

"Can we go to Six?" That would fill the air with radioactive gas from the fusion chamber and kill almost everyone on board; but?

"No sir, we cannot. Nothing is left but Destruct. That's still alive."

"The air up there should be getting quite toxic by now," Kahn's voice said. "You don't have much time."

"What do you want, Kahn?"

"Surrender of the bridge."

"Refused," Kirk said.

"Very well. It is academic, anyhow. In ten minutes, every person on the bridge will be dead."

Nothing further was heard from Kahn after that. Slowly, the air turned foul. After a while, nobody was conscious but Kirk, and then? and then?

Kirk awoke, with considerable surprise, in the briefing room. His entire staff seemed to be with him—all weak, but all alive. They were heavily under guard by Kahn and a group of men very like him, all carrying *Enterprise* phasers. The men from the *Botany Bay* were inarguably splendid—looking specimens—large, strong, healthy, handsome, and above all, alert.

"Very good," Kahn said. "Now we can talk. You see, Captain, nothing changes—except man. Your technical accomplishments are illusions, simply the tools which men use. The key has always been man himself. Improve a mechanical device and you double your capacity; improve man, and you gain a thousand fold. You, I judge, are such a man, Captain, as am I. You would be wise to join me."

Kirk said nothing. Kahn turned to Spock. "I am tempted," Spock said. "I admire your tactics? but not, I am afraid, your philosophy. And I know from history how self-appointed supermen treat mixed breeds. Let us see how you run the ship by yourself."

"You will see. My offer to you is closed. Navigator, I want you to set course for the nearest colonized planet—one with port facilities and a population which is not afraid of discipline."

"Go to blazes," Spinelli said.

"It is as I thought," Spock said. "You may know the *Enterprise* well, Commander, but your newly revived colleagues do not. I think we have a stalemate."

"Do we? Dr McCoy, you maintain a decompression chamber in your laboratory, isn't that so? Yes, I know it is. Joaquin, take Captain Kirk to the chamber. Put him inside, and lower the pressure to zero. I trust the rest of you understand what that means. You can spare him that. All I want from you is your word that you will continue performing your duties."

"Nobody," Kirk said harshly, "is to lift a finger to save me. I so order."

"I am not bluffing," Kahn said pleasantly. "If, of course, you allow your Captain to die, you will all follow him, one by one, into

the chamber."

Kirk caught Marla's eye. She was staring wide-eyed at Kahn. Evidently she had discovered something she hadn't taken into account.

There was a blare from a wall speaker, and then a babble of angry, excited crowd noises. "Kahn," said an unfamiliar voice, "this is Paul in the recreation room. They're getting out of hand. I may have to kill a few of them."

"Do so, then."

"No!" Marla said. "I have friends there? Kahn, please. If I could talk to them? reassure them? There's no need to kill them."

"You may attempt it," Kahn said. "Be certain they understand that I have no compunctions about killing if I'm forced to."

The guards hustled Kirk out, with Marla in tow. Perhaps they were unfamiliar with the ship in detail, but they certainly knew their way to McCoy's laboratory. They bundled Kirk into the decompression chamber as though they were doing nothing more interesting than autoclaving a rack of test tubes. The door shut, and a moment later Kirk heard the pumps begin to throb.

For some reason, he felt neither alarmed nor resigned. His chief emotion was anger, at being put through asphyxiation twice in one hour.

There seemed to be nothing to do about it, however.

Then the door hissed and swung back. Kirk stepped out cautiously. One of the supermen, the one called Joaquin, was out cold on the floor, with Marla standing over him, a wrench held awkwardly in her hands. The other guard evidently had gone off somewhere.

"Are you all right?" Marla said tremulously.

"I think so. The pressure didn't have time to drop much. I'm glad to see you're good for something." He stooped and picked up Joaquin's phaser.

Marla grasped his arm. "Captain, please," she said.

"Well?"

"I saved your life. Promise me you? won't kill him."

"No promises," Kirk said, looking around the laboratory. After a moment, he spotted what he wanted; a bulb of the anesthetic gas McCoy used to capture specimens. He juggled it with pleasure. "Stay here and try not to get yourself any deeper into trouble than you are. I think I am about to bag myself some choice items for some zoo."

It was not all that easy. Before it was over, one of the supermen was dead, and almost everyone else on both sides was considerably banged up. At last, however, the survivors from the *Botany Bay* were locked in a hold, and Kirk and his officers reassembled in the briefing room.

"Well, Mr Spock," Kirk said, "I think we know now why they left the Earth."

"Yes, sir. To free themselves of the rabble, and start fresh. In my opinion they would never have succeeded, even had they made it to a habitable world. The man who cannot know fear is gravely handicapped."

"We are about to put that to the test. Have Kahn brought in here, please."

Kahn was brought in, under guard, with Marla behind him. Both looked at Kirk defiantly.

"At present," Kirk said, "we are orbiting a planet in a system unknown to you, and which I shall not further identify. It is savage and inhospitable, but with breathable atmosphere and land which can be cultivated. You have the following choice: To be put ashore on this world, with a minimum of survival equipment; or, to be taken to Star Base Twelve to be assigned to rehabilitation. The second choice would be rather drastic in your case, but it would enable you to fit into our society. Which do you prefer?"

"Captain," Kahn said, "I suppose you will remember that Lucifer said when he fell into the pit."

"I remember it well. I take it that's your answer?"

"It is."

"It may interest you to know that Systems Officer McGivers, given the choice of standing court martial or sharing your exile, has chosen to go with you."

Kahn looked at her and smiled. "I knew I was right about you," he said. "You have the fire. And think of this: we have what we wanted after all—a world to win." He swung on Kirk. "And, Captain, we will make it an empire. You'll see."

"If you do," Kirk said, "you'll have earned it. Guards, beam them down."

Kahn exited without a backward look, but Marla turned at the door.

"Goodbye, Captain," she said. "I'm sorry. But I do love him."

"I wish you luck, Lieutenant."

After a short silence, Scott said, "It's a shame for a good Scotsman to admit it, but I'm not up on my Milton. What *did* Lucifer say after he fell into the pit?"

"He said, 'Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.' Mr Spock, clear for space. I want to get under way as soon as possible."

"Yes, Captain. What shall I do with the *Botany Bay*?"

"Hmm? You'd better dump it into—no, on second thought, let's keep it in tow. I suppose there are still things aboard her that the historians will want to see. At the moment, though, whenever I say 'historian' I have to repress a shudder."

"Let us think ahead, then," Spock said. "It would be interesting to come back to this system in a hundred years and see what crop had sprung up from the seed we have planted today."

"It would indeed," Kirk said. "But I'll tell you something else, Mr Spock. I only hope that in a hundred years, that crop won't have sprung right out of the ground and come out looking for *us*."

THIS SIDE OF PARADISE

(Nathan Butler and D. C. Fontana)

There was no answer from the Sandoval colony on Omicron Ceti III to the *Enterprise's* signals, but that was hardly surprising; the colonists, all one hundred and fifty of them, had probably been dead for the better part of three years, as two previous colonies had died, for reasons then mysterious. Elias Sandoval had known this past history and had determined to settle on the planet anyhow; it was in all other respects a tempting place.

It was not until after his group had settled in—and had stopped communicating—that the Berthold emission of the planet's sun had been discovered. Little enough was known about Berthold radiation even now, but it had been shown that direct exposure to it under laboratory conditions distintegrated living animal tissue in as little as seventy-two hours. A planet's atmosphere would cut down some of the effect, to the point where a week's exposure might be safe, but certainly not three years. And there was no preventive, and no cure.

The settlement proper, however, was still there and was easy to spot. Kirk made up a landing party of six, including himself, Spock, McCoy, Lieutenant Timothy Fletcher (a biologist), Sulu and a crewman named Dimont. The settlement proved to consist of a surprisingly small cluster of buildings, with fields beyond it. Kirk looked around.

"It took these people a year to make the trip from Earth," he said. "They came all that way—and died."

"Hardly that, sir," said a man's voice. The party snapped around toward it.

A big, bluff, genial-looking man clad in sturdy work clothes had come around a corner of a building, with two others behind him, similarly dressed and carrying tools. The first man came forward, holding out his hand.

"Welcome to Omicron Ceti III," he said. "I am Elias Sandoval."

Kirk took the hand, but could think of nothing to say but a mumble of thanks.

"We've seen no one outside our group since we left Earth four years ago," the man went on. "We've expected someone for quite some time. Our subspace radio has never worked properly and we, I'm afraid, had no one among us who could master its intricacies. But we were sure when we were not heard from, a ship would come."

"Actually, Mr Sandoval, we didn't come because of your radio silence…"

"It makes little difference, Captain. You are here, and we are happy to have you. Come, let me show you our settlement."

He began to walk away, not bothering to look back, as if certain that they would follow. The other colonists had already left.

"On pure speculation," McCoy said drily, "just as an educated guess, I'd say that man isn't dead."

Spock checked his tricorder. "The intensity of Berthold radiation is at the predicted level. At this intensity, we will be safe for a week, if necessary. But…"

"But these people shouldn't be alive," Kirk said. "Well, there's no point in debating it in a vacuum. Let's get some answers."

He started after Sandoval. From closer range, the buildings could be seen to be not deserted, only quiet. Nearby, a woman was hanging out some wash; in another structure, a woman placed a fresh-baked pie in a window to cool. It might have been a tranquil Earthly farm community of centuries ago, except for a scattering of peculiar plants with bulbous pods, apparently indigenous, which revealed that it was on another planet.

Sandoval led the landing party into his own quarters. "There are two other settlements," he said, "but we have forty-five colonists here."

"What was the reason for the dispersal?" Kirk asked.

"We felt three separate groups might have a better opportunity for growth. And, if some disease should strike one group, the other two would be less likely to be endangered. Omicron is an ideal agricultural planet, Captain, and we determined that we would not suffer the fate of expeditions that had gone before us."

A woman came from an inner door and stopped, seeing the strangers. She looked Eurasian, and was strikingly beautiful.

"Ah, Leila," Sandoval said, turning to her. "Come and meet our guests. This is Leila Kalomi, our botanist. Captain Kirk, Dr McCoy, Mr Spock…"

"Mr Spock and I have met," she said, holding out a hand to him. "It has been a long time."

He took the hand gently but awkwardly. "The years have seemed twice as long," he said.

She bowed her head, silently accepting the compliment. Then she looked up, as if searching his face for something more; but there was nothing but his usual calm. He released her hand slowly.

"Mr Sandoval," Kirk said, "we do have a mission here. A number of examinations, tests…"

"By all means, please attend to them, Captain. I think you'll find our settlement interesting. Our philosophy is a simple one: that men should return to the less complicated life. We have very few mechanical things here—no vehicles, no weapons—" He smiled. "As I said, even the radio has never worked properly. We have harmony here—complete peace."

"We'll try not to disturb your work. Gentlemen, if you'll come outside now…"

On the porch, he flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.*"

"*Enterprise.* Lieutenant Uhura here."

"Lieutenant, we've found the colony apparently well and healthy. We're beginning an investigation. Relay that information to Starfleet, and then beam down to me all the information we have on this last Omicron expedition."

"Yes, sir. *Enterprise* out."

"Gentlemen, carry out your previous instructions. If you find anything out of the ordinary, report to me at once."

The party scattered.

Dimont was the first to find the next anomaly. He had been raised in the farm country of the Mojave, and was leading cows to pasture when he was six, up at dawn and then working all day in the fields. It was his opinion, expressed to Sulu, that "they could use a little of that spirit here."

But there was no place for it. There were no cows here; the one barn hadn't even been built for them, but only for storage. Nor were there any horses, pigs, even dogs. A broader check disclosed that the same was true of the whole planet: there was nothing on it but people and vegetation. The records showed that the expedition had carried some animals for breeding and food, but none seemed to have survived. Well, that was perhaps not an

anomaly in the true sense, for they couldn't have survived. In theory, neither could the people.

But they had. "I've examined nine men so far," McCoy reported, "ages varying from twenty-three to fifty-nine. Every one of them is in perfect physical shape—textbook responses. If everybody was like them, I could throw away my shingle. But there's something even stranger."

"What is it?" Kirk asked.

"I've got Sandoval's medical record as of four years ago when he left Earth. There was scar tissue on his lungs from lobar penumonia suffered when he was a child. No major operations, but he did have an appendectomy. But when I examined the man not an hour ago, he was as perfect as the rest of them."

"Instrument malfunction?"

"No. I thought of that and tested it on myself. It accurately recorded my lack of tonsils and those two broken ribs I had once. But it *didn't* record any scar tissue on Sandoval's lungs—and it *did* record a healthy appendix where one was supposedly removed."

Fletcher's report also turned up an anomaly. "The soil here is rich, the rainfall moderate, the climate temperate the year round. You could grow anything here, and they've got a variety of crops in—grains, potatoes, beans. But for an agricultural colony they actually have very little acreage planted. There's enough to sustain the colony, but very little more. And another thing, they're not bothering to rotate crops in their fields—haven't for three years. That's poor practice for a group like this, even if the soil is good."

It was like a jigsaw puzzle all one color—a lot of pieces but no key to where they fitted.

Then came the order to evacuate, direct from Admiral Komack of Starfleet. Despite the apparent well-being of the colonists, they were to be moved immediately to Starbase 27, where arrangements were being made for complete examinations of all of them. Exposed Starship personnel were also to be held in quarantine until cleared at the Starbase. Apparently somebody up the line thought radiation disease was infectious. Well, with Berthold rays, anything seemed to be possible, as McCoy observed wrily.

"You'll have to inform your people of Starfleet's decision," Kirk told Sandoval. "Meanwhile we can begin to prepare accommodations for them aboard ship…"

"No," said Sandoval pleasantly.

"Mr Sandoval, this is not an arbitrary decision on my part. It is a Starfleet order."

"This is completely unnecessary. We are in no danger here."

"We've explained the Berthold radiation and its effect," McCoy said. "Can't you understand…"

"How can I make *you* understand, Doctor? Your own instruments tell you we are in excellent health, and our records show we have not had one death among us."

"What about the animals?" Kirk said.

"We are vegetarians."

"That doesn't answer my question. Why did all the animals die?"

"Captain, you stress unimportant things," Sandoval said, as calmly as before. "We will not leave. Your arguments have some validity, but they do not apply to us."

"Sandoval, I've been ordered to evacuate this colony, and that's exactly what I intend to do, with or without your help."

"And how will you do that?" Sandoval said, turning away. "With a butterfly net?"

It was Spock who was finally given the key. He was standing with Leila looking out over a small garden, checking his tricorder.

"Nothing," he said, "not even insects. Yet your plants grow, and you have survived exposure to Berthold radiation."

"It can be explained," Leila said.

"Please do."

"Later."

"I have never understood the female capacity to avoid a direct answer on any subject."

She put a hand on his arm. "And I never understood you, until now." She tapped his chest. "There was always a place in here where no one could come. There was only the face you allow people to see. Only one side you allow them to know."

"I would like to know how your people have managed to survive here."

"I missed you."

"You should be dead."

She took her hand from his arm and stepped back. "If I show you how we survived, will you try to understand how we feel

about our life here? About each other?"

"Emotions are alien to me…"

"No. Someone else might believe that—your shipmates, your Captain. But not me. Come this way."

She led him to an open field, uncultivated, with pod plants growing amid grass and low brush. They rustled gently in a little breeze.

"This is the place," she said.

"It looks like any other such area. What is the nature of this thing, if you please?"

"The specific elements and properties are not important. What is important is that it gives life—peace—love."

"What you describe was once called in the vernacular 'a happiness pill.' And you, as a scientist, should know that is impossible."

"No. And I was one of the first to find them."

"Them?"

"The spores." She pointed to the pod plants.

Spock bent to examine them. At the same moment, one of the pods flew apart, like a powdery dandelion broken by the wind. Spock dropped his tricorder to shield his face as the powder flew up about him. Then he screamed.

Leila, frightened, moved forward a step, reaching out a hand to him.

"I—can't," he moaned, almost inaudibly. "Please—don't—don't…"

"It shouldn't hurt, not like this! It didn't hurt us!"

"I'm not—like you."

Then, slowly, his face began to change, becoming less rigid, more at peace. Seeing the change, Leila reached up to touch his cheek with gentle fingers. He reached out to gather her into his arms, very gently, as though afraid this woman and this feeling were so fragile that he might break them.

After the lass, she sat down, and he lay down beside her, his head in her lap. "See the clouds," he said after a while. "That one looks like a dragon—you see the tail and the dorsal spines?"

"I have never seen a dragon."

"I have, on Berengaria VII. But I never saw one in a cloud before." His communicator abruptly shrilled, but he ignored it. "Or rainbows. Do you know I can tell you exactly why one appears in

the sky—but considering its beauty was always out of the question."

"Not here," Leila said. The communicator shrilled again, insistently. "Perhaps you should answer?"

"It will only be the Captain."

But finally he lifted the communicator and snapped up the screen. Kirk's anxious voice sounded instantly. "Mr Spock!"

"What do you want?" Spock asked lazily.

"Spock, is that you?"

"Yes, Captain. What do you want?"

"Where are you?"

Spock considered the question calmly. "I don't believe I want to tell you."

"Spock, I don't know what you think you're doing, but this is an order. Report back to me at the settlement in ten minutes. We're evacuating the colony to Starbase 27…"

"No, I don't think so."

"You don't think so *what?*"

"I don't think so, *sir*."

"Spock, report to the settlement immediately. Acknowledge. Spock!"

The First Officer tossed the communicator away among the plants.

It seemed to be their fruiting time; they were bursting all over the area now. Fletcher was caught next, then McCoy, then Sulu and Dimont—and finally Kirk himself.

But Kirk alone was unaffected. As peace and love and tranquillity settled around him like a soggy blanket, he was blazing. His temper was not improved by the discovery that McCoy was arranging for transportation to the ship not of colonists or their effects, but of pod plants. Evidently a couple of hundred were already aboard. Hotter than ever, Kirk ordered himself to be beamed aboard.

He found the bridge deserted except for Uhura, who was busy at her communications board. All other instruments were on automatic.

"Lieutenant, put me through to Admiral Komack at Starfleet."

As she turned from the board, Kirk was shocked to see that she, too, wore the same sweet, placid expression as the others. She said, "Oh—I'm afraid I can't do that, Captain."

"I don't suppose," Kirk said tightly, "it would do any good to say that was an order."

"I know it was, Captain. But all communications are out."

"All?" Kirk reached past her and began to flick switches on the board.

"All except for ship to surface; we'll need that for a while. I short-circuited all the rest." She patted his arm. "It's really for the best."

She arose, and strolled away from him to the elevator, which swallowed her up. Kirk tried her board again, but to no effect. He slammed his fist down in aggravation.

Then he noticed a light pulsing steadily on Spock's library-computer. Moving to that station, he pushed the related button.

"Transporter Room."

There was no answer, but clearly the room was in use. He made for it in a hurry.

He found a line of crew personnel in the corridor leading to the Transporter Room. All waited patiently. Every so often the line moved forward a few steps.

"Report to your stations!"

The crewmen stared at him quietly, benevolently—almost pityingly.

"I'm sorry, sir," one of them said. "We're transporting down to join the colony."

"I said, get back to your stations."

"No, sir."

"Do you know what you're saying?"

"You've been down there," the crewman said earnestly. "You know how beautiful it is—how perfect. We're going."

"This is mutiny!"

"Yes, sir," the crewman said calmly. "It is."

Kirk went back to tie bridge and to the communications board. As Uhura had said, ship to ground was still operative. He called McCoy, and was rather surprised to get an answer.

"Bones, the spores of your damnable plants have evidently been carried throughout the ship by the ventilation system. The crew is deserting to join the Omicron colony, and I can't stop them."

"Why, that's fine," McCoy said; his accent had moved considerably south of the Mason-Dixon line, almost to his Georgia boyhood. "Y'all come right down."

"Never mind that. At least you can give me some information. I haven't been affected. Why not?"

"You always were a stubborn cuss, Jimmy. But you'll see the light."

Kirk fumed in silence for a moment. "Can't you tell me anything about the physical-psychological aspects of this thing?"

"*I'm* not concerned with any physical-psychological aspects, Jim boy. We're all perfectly healthy."

"I've been hearing that word a lot lately. Perfect Everything is perfect."

"Yup. That it is."

"I'll bet you've even grown your tonsils back."

"Uh-huh," McCoy said dreamily. "Jim, have you ever had a real, cold, Georgia-style mint julep?"

"Bones, Bones, I need your help. Can you run tests, blood samples, anything at all to give us some kind of lead on what these things are? How to counteract them?"

"Who wants to counteract Paradise, Jim?"

"Bones—" But the contact had been broken at the other end. Then he headed back for the Transporter Room. He was going to get some cooperation from his ship's surgeon if he had to take the madman by the ears.

He found Spock in Sandoval's office, both looking languidly pleased with themselves.

"Where's McCoy?"

"He said he was going to create something called a mint julep," Spock said, then added helpfully, "That's a drink."

"Captain," Sandoval said. "Listen to me. Why don't you join us?"

"In your own private paradise?"

Sandoval nodded. "The spores have made it that. You see, Captain, we *would* have died three years ago. We didn't know what was happening then, but the Berthold rays you spoke of affected us within two or three weeks of our landing here. We were sick and dying when Leila found the plants."

"The spores themselves are alien, Captain," Spock added. "They weren't on the planet when the other two expeditions were attempted. That's why the colonists died."

"How do you know all this?"

"The spores—tell us. They aren't really spores, but a kind of group organism made up of billions of sub-microscopic cells. They act directly on the central nervous system."

"Where did they come from?"

"Impossible to tell. It was so long ago and so far away. Perhaps the planet does not even exist any longer. They drifted in space until finally drawn here by the Berthold radiation, on which they thrive. The plants are native, but they are only a repository for the spores until they find an animal host."

"What do they need us for?"

"Bodies. They do no harm. In return they give the host complete health and peace of mind…"

"Paradise, in short."

"Why not?" Spock said. "There is no want or need here. It's a true Eden. There is belonging—and love."

"No wants or needs? We weren't meant for that, any of us. A man stagnates and goes sour if he has no ambition, no desire to be more than he is."

"We have what we need," said Sandoval.

"Except a challenge! You haven't made an inch of progress here. You're not creating or learning, Sandoval. You're backsliding—rotting away in your paradise."

Spock shook his head sadly. "You don't understand. But you'll come around, sooner or later."

"Be damned to that. I'm going back to the ship."

He could not remember any time before when he had been so furious for so long a time.

The *Enterprise* was utterly deserted now. Without anybody aboard her, Kirk had a new and lonely realization of how big she was. And yet for all her immense resources, he was helpless. It was amazing how quickly all her entire complement had surrendered to the Lethe of the spores, leaving him and no one else raging futilely…

Raging?

Futilely?

Wait a minute.

There were pod plants all over the ship, so there was no problem about getting a sample. He took it down to McCoy's

laboratory, located a slide, and then McCoy's microscope. A drop of water on the slide—right; now, mix some of the spores into the drop. Put the slide under the microscope. It had been decades since he had done anything like this, but he remembered from schooldays that one must run the objective lens down to the object, and then focus *up,* never down. Good; the spores came into register, tiny, and spined like pollen grains.

Getting up again, he went through McCoy's hypospray rack until he found one of a dozen all labeled *adrenaline.* He sprayed the slide, and then looked again.

There was nothing there. The spores were adrenalin-soluble. He had found the answer. It was almost incredibly dangerous, but there was no other way. He went back to the bridge and called Spock. If Spock didn't answer…

"Spock here. What is it now?"

"I've joined you," Kirk said quietly. "I understand now, Spock."

"That's wonderful, Captain. When will you beam down?"

"I've been packing some things, and I realized there's equipment aboard we should have down at the settlement. You know we can't come back aboard once the last of us has left."

"Do you want a party beamed up?"

"No, I think you and I can handle it. Why don't I beam you up now?"

"All right. Ready in ten minutes."

Kirk was waiting in the Transporter Room, necessarily, when the First Officer materialized, and was holding a metal bar in both hands, like a quarter-staff. Spock took a step toward him, smiling a greeting. Kirk did not smile back.

"*Now,*" he said harshly, "you mutinous, disloyal, computerized half-breed—we'll see about you deserting my ship!"

Spock stared. He seemed mildly surprised, but unflustered. "Your use of the term half-breed is perfectly applicable, Captain, but 'computerized' is inaccurate. A machine can be computerized, but not a man."

"What makes you think you're a man? You're an overgrown jackrabbit. You're an elf with an overactive thyroid."

"Captain, I don't understand…"

"Of course you don't! You don't have brains enough to understand! All you've got is printed circuits!"

"Captain, if you'll…"

"But what can you expect from a freak whose father was a computer and whose mother was an encyclopedia!"

"My mother," Spock said, his expression not quite so bland now, "was a teacher, my father an ambassador."

"He was a freak like his son! Ambassador from a planet of freaks! The Vulcan never lived who had an ounce of integrity!"

"Captain—please—don't…"

"You're a traitor from a race of traitors! Disloyal to the core! Rotten—like all the rest of your subhuman race! And you've got the gall to make love to that girl! A human girl!"

"No more," Spock said stonily.

"I haven't even got started! Does she know what she's getting, Spock? A carcass full of memory banks that ought to be squatting on a mushroom instead of passing himself off as a man. You belong in a circus, Spock, not a starship! Right next to the dog-faced boy!"

With this, Kirk stepped forward and slapped the livid Spock twice, hard. With a roar, Spock swung out at him. Kirk leaped back out of his way, raising the bar of metal between his hands to parry the blow.

It was not much of a fight. Kirk was solely concerned with getting and keeping out of the way, while Spock was striking out with killing force, and with all the science of his once-warrior race. There could be only one ending. Kirk was deprived of the metal bar at the third onslaught, and finally took a backhand which knocked him to the floor against the far wall. Spock, his face contorted, snatched up a stool and lifted it over his head.

Kirk looked up at him and grinned ruefully. "All right, Mr Spock. Had enough?"

Spock stared down at him, looking confused. Finally he lowered the chair.

"I never realized what it took to get under that thick hide of yours. Anyhow, I don't know what you're mad about. It isn't every First Officer who gets to belt his Captain—several times." He felt his jaw tenderly.

"You—you deliberately did that to me."

"Yes. The spores, Mr Spock. Tell me about the spores."

Spock seemed to reach inside himself. "They're—gone. I don't belong any more."

"That was my intention. You said they were benevolent and peaceful. Violent emotions overwhelm and destroy them. I had to

get you angry enough to shake off their influence. That's the answer, Spock."

"That may be correct, Captain, but we could hardly initiate a brawl with over five hundred crewmen and colonists. It is not logical."

Kirk grinned. "I was thinking of something you told me once about certain subsonic frequencies affecting the emotions."

"Yes, Captain. A certain low organ tone induces a feeling of awe. There is another frequency that affects the digestion."

"None of those will do. I want one that irritates people—something that we could hook into the communications station and broadcast over the communicators."

"That would of course also have to involve a bypass signal." Spock thought a moment "It can be done."

"Then let's get to work."

"Captain—striking a fellow officer is a court-martial offense."

"If we're both in the brig, who's going to build the subsonic transmitter?"

"That's quite logical, Captain. To work, then."

The signal generated by the modified Feinbergers and rebroadcast from the bypassed communicators went unheard in the settlement, but it was felt almost at once, almost as though the victims had had itching powder put under their skins. Within a few minutes, everyone's nerves were exacerbated; within a few more, fights were breaking out all over the colony. The fights did not last long; as the spores dissolved in the wash of adrenalin in the bloodstream, the tumult died back to an almost aghast silence. Not long after that, contrite calls began to come in aboard the *Enterprise.*

The rest was anticlimax. The crew came back, the colonists and their effects were loaded aboard, the plants were cleaned out of the ship except for one specimen that went to Lieutenant Fletcher's laboratory. Finally, Omicron Ceti III was dwindling rapidly on the main viewing screen, watched by Kirk, Spock and McCoy.

"That's the second time," McCoy said, nodding toward the screen, "that Man has been thrown out of Paradise."

"No—this time we walked away on our own. Maybe we don't belong in Paradise, Bones," Kirk said thoughtfully. "Maybe we're

meant to fight our way through. Struggle. Claw our way up, fighting every inch of the way. Maybe we can't stroll to the music of lutes, Bones—we must march to the sound of drums."

"Poetry, Captain," Spock said. "Nonregulation."

"We haven't heard much from you about the Omicron Ceti III experience, Mr Spock."

"I have little to say about it, Captain," Spock said, slowly and quietly, "except that—for the first time in my life—I was happy."

Both the others turned and looked at him; but there was nothing to be seen now but the Mr Spock they had long known, controlled, efficient, and emotionless.

THE DEVIL IN THE DARK

(Gene L. Coon)

Janus was an ugly planet, reddish-brown, slowly rotating, with a thick layer of clouds so turbulent that it appeared to be boiling. Not a hospitable place, but a major source of pergium—an energy metal-like plutonium, meta-stable, atomic number 358; the underground colony there was long-established, highly modern, almost completely automated. It had never given any trouble.

"Almost fifty people butchered," Chief Engineer Vanderberg said bitterly. He was standing beside his desk, nervous and urgent; facing him were Kirk, Spock, Lt. Commander Giotto, Doc McCoy and a security officer named Kelly. "Production's at an absolute stop."

"I can see that," Kirk said, gesturing toward the chart on the office wall, which showed a precipitous dip. "But please slow down, Mr Vanderberg. What's the cause?"

"A monster." Vanderberg stared at the *Enterprise* delegation with belligerent defensiveness, as though daring them to deny it. He was clearly highly overwrought.

"All right," Kirk said. "Let's assume there's a monster. What has it done? When did it start?"

Vanderberg made an obvious effort to control himself. He pushed a button on his desk communicator, which sat near a globe some ten inches in diameter of what appeared to be some dark-gray crystalline solid. "Send Ed Appel in here," he told it, and then added to Kirk, "My production engineer. About three months ago, we opened a new level. It was unusually rich in pergium, platinum, uranium, even gold. The whole planet's a treasure house, but I've never seen anything like this before, even here. We were just setting up to mine it when things began to happen. First the automatic machinery began to disintegrate, piece by piece. The metal just seemed to dissolve away. No mystery about the agent; it was aqua regia, possibly with a little hydrofluoric acid mixed in—vicious stuff. We don't store vast quantities of such stuff here, I can tell you that. Offhand I don't even know what we'd keep it *in.*"

"Teflon," Spock suggested.

"Yes, but my point is, we *don't.*"

"You said people were butchered," Kirk reminded him gently.

"Yes. First our maintenance engineers. Sent them down into the halls to repair the corroded machinery. We found them—burned to a crisp."

"Not lava, I suppose," Kirk said.

"There is no current volcanic activity on this planet, Captain," Spock said.

"He's right. None. It was that same damn acid mixture. At first the deaths were down deep, but they've been moving up toward our levels. The last man who died, three days ago, was only three levels below this one."

"I'd like to examine his body," McCoy said.

"We kept it for you—what was left. It isn't pretty."

The office door opened to admit a tough-looking, squat, businesslike man of middle age, wearing a number one phaser at his belt.

"You posted guards? Sentries?" Kirk asked.

"Of course. And five of them have died."

"Has anyone seen this—this monster of yours?"

"I did," said the newcomer.

"This is Ed Appel. Describe it, Ed."

"I can't. I only got a glimpse of it. It was big, and kind of shaggy. I shot at it, and I hit it square, too, a good clean shot. It didn't even slow it down."

"Anything a phaser will not affect," Spock said, "has to be an illusion. Any life-form, that is."

"Tell that to Billy Anderson," Appel said grimly. "He never had a chance. I only got away by the skin of my teeth."

"That's the story," Vanderberg said. "Nobody'll go down into the lower levels now, and I don't blame them. If the Federation wants pergium from us, they'll have to do something about it."

"That's what we're here for, Mr Vanderberg," Kirk said.

"Pretty tough, aren't you?" said Appel. "Starship, phaser banks, energy from anti-matter, the whole bit. Well, you can't get your starship down into the tunnels."

"I don't think well need to, Mr Appel. Mr Spock, I'll want a complete computer evaluation, with interviews from everyone who knows anything about the events here. Mr Vanderberg, have you a

complete subsurface chart of all drifts, tunnels, galleries and so on?"

"Of course."

Spock had been inspecting the dark-gray sphere on the desk. He stepped forward and touched it. "This, Mr Vanderberg. What is it?"

"It's a silicon nodule. There's a million of them down there. No commercial value."

"But a geological oddity, to say the least, especially in igneous rocks. Pure silicon?"

"A light oxide layer on the outside, a few trace elements below. Look, we didn't call you here so you could collect rocks."

"Mr Spock collects information, and it's often useful," Kirk said. "We'll need your complete cooperation."

"You'll get it. Just find this creature, whatever it is. I'm dead sick of losing my men—and I've got a quota to meet, too."

"Your order of priorities," Kirk said, "is the same as mine."

They worked in a room just off Vanderberg's office, feeding data to the *Enterprise's* computer and getting evaluations back by communicator. The charts with which Vanderberg supplied them turned out to be immensely involved—thousands of serpentine lines crossing and recrossing. Their number was incredible, even after allowing for fifty years of tunneling with completely automated equipment. The network extended throughout the entire crust of the planet, and perhaps even deeper.

"Not man-made," Spock agreed. "They may be lava tubes, but if so, they are unique in my experience."

"They won't make hunting any easier," Kirk said. "Bones, what's the word on the autopsy?"

"The plant's physician and the chemists were right, Jim. Schmitter wasn't burned to death. He was flooded or sprayed with that acid mixture."

"Could it eat away machinery, too?"

"Aqua regia will dissolve even gold. What puzzles me is the trace of hydrofluoric acid. It's a very *weak* acid, but there are two things it attacks strongly. One of them is glass—you have to keep it in wax bottles, or, as Spock suggested, teflon."

"And the other thing?"

"Human flesh."

"Hmm. It sounds like a mixture somebody calculated very carefully. Mr Spock, do you think this monster story could be a blind for some kind of sabotage?"

"Possibly, Captain. For example, Mr Vanderberg thinks that the creature uses the network of tubes to move through. But if you plot the deaths and the acts of destruction, and their times, you find that the creature cannot possibly have appeared at all these points as rapidly as indicated."

"How recent are those tunnel charts?"

"They were made last year—before the first appearance of the alleged monster, but not long before. Moreover, Captain, a sensor check indicates *no* life under the surface of Janus but the accountable human residents of the colony. We are confronted with two alternatives: either to patrol thousands of miles of tunnels, on foot, in the faint hope of encountering the alleged monster; or to find a plausible human suspect who has managed to manufacture and hide an almost inexhaustible supply of this intractable corrosive, and who has a portable, innocuous-looking carrier for it with a capacity of at least thirty liters."

"I rather prefer the monster theory," McCoy said. "If we catch a man behind these murders, I think we ought to lower him into his own acid vat a quarter of an inch at a time."

"If," Spock said, "is the operative word in either case…"

He was interrupted by a distant, heavy boom. The room shuddered, the lights flickered, and then an alarm bell was clanging. A moment later, Vanderberg burst in from his office.

"Something's happened in the main reactor room!" he shouted.

They left at a dead run, Vanderberg leading the way, McCoy bringing up the rear. The trail wound up in a tunnel elaborately posted with signs reading CAUTION: RADIATION—MAIN REACTOR CHAMBER—ONLY AUTHORISED PERSONS BEYOND THIS POINT. The floor of the tunnel looked as though something very heavy had been dragged along it. At the far end was what had once been a large metal door, but which now consisted chiefly of curled strips around a huge hole. Before it was a small, blackened lump which might once have been a man.

Vanderberg recoiled. "Look, at that!" Then he hurried toward the ruined door. McCoy knelt quickly beside the charred lump, tricorder out; Kirk and Spock followed Vanderberg.

Inside, the bulk of the reactor was buried in the walls, showing only a large faceplate and a control panel. Pipes crisscrossed the

chamber; and an appalled Vanderberg was standing looking down at a sort of nexus of these—a junction that ending in nothing.

Kirk scanned the control panel. "I didn't know anyone still used fission for power."

"I don't suppose anybody does but us. But pergium is money—we ship it all out—and since we have so much uranium nobody wants, we use it here. Or we did until now."

"Explain."

"The main moderator pump's gone. Lucky the cutouts worked, or this whole place would be a flaming mass of sodium."

Spock knelt and inspected the aborted junctions. "Acid again. Like the door. Mr Vanderberg, do you have a replacement for the missing pump?"

"I doubt it. It was platinum, corrosion-proof, never gave us any trouble; should have lasted forever." Suddenly, visibly, Vanderberg began to panic. "Look, the reactor's shut down now—and it provides heat and electricity and life support for the whole colony! And if we override, we'll have a maximum accident that will poison half the planet!"

"Steady," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, might we have a replacement on shipboard?"

"No, Captain. To find one, you would need a museum."

Kirk took out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*… Lt. Uhura, get me Mr Scott… Scotty, this is the Captain. Could you contrive a perfusion pump for a PXK fission reactor?"

"Hoo, Captain, you must be haverin'."

"I'm dead serious; it's vital."

"Well, sir—I could put together some odds and ends. But they wouldn't hold for long."

"How long?"

"Forty-eight hours, maybe, with a bit of luck. It all ought to be platinum, ye see, and I've not got enough, so I'll have to patch in with gold, which won't bear the pressure long…"

"Get together what you need and beam down here with it."

Kirk put away the communicator and bent upon Vanderberg a look of deep suspicion. "Mr Vanderberg, I have to tell you that I don't like the way these coincidences are mounting up. How could some hypothetical monster attack precisely the one mechanism in an almost ancient reactor which would create a double crisis like this? And how would it happen to be carrying around with it a

mixture of acids precisely calculated to dissolve even platinum—and also human flesh?"

"I don't know," Vanderberg said helplessly. "You suspect sabotage? Impossible. Besides, Ed Appel *saw* the monster."

"He says."

"Ed's been my production chief almost throughout my entire career. I'd trust him with my life. And besides, what would be his motive? Look, dammit, Kirk, my people are being murdered! This is no time for fantasies about spies! The thing is there, it's free, it's just shut us down right under your nose! Why in God's name don't you *do* something?"

"Captain," Spock's voice said from behind them. "Will you come out and look at this, please?"

Kirk went out into the main tunnel to find the First Officer contemplating a side branch. "This is most curious," he said. "This tunnel is not indicated on any of the charts we were provided. It simply was not there before."

"Too recent to be on the maps, maybe?"

"Yes, but how did it get here, Captain? It shows no signs of having been drilled."

Kirk looked closer. "That's so. And the edges are fused. Could it be a lava tube?"

"That seems most unlikely," Spock said. "Had there been any vulcanism on this level since we arrived, everybody would be aware of it. And it joins a charted tunnel back there about fifty yards."

"Hmm. Let's go back to the ship. I feel the need for a conference."

Spock brought with him into the briefing room of the *Enterprise* one of the strange spherical objects Vanderberg had called silicon nodules, and set it on the table. Then he sat down and stared into it, looking incongruously like a fortune-teller in uniform.

"I think it's mass hysteria," McCoy said.

"Hysteria?" Kirk said. "Dozens of people have been killed."

"Some—natural cause. A phenomenon—and people have dreamed up a mysterious monster to account for it."

Spock stirred. "Surely, Doctor. A natural cause. But not hysteria."

"All right. You asked my opinion. I gave it to you. How do I know? Maybe there is some kind of a monster…"

"No creature is monstrous in its own environment, Doctor. And this one appears to be intelligent, as well."

"What makes you think so?"

"The missing pump was not taken by accident," Spock said. "It was the one piece of equipment absolutely essential to the operation of the reactor."

Kirk looked at his First Officer. "You think this creature is trying to drive the colonists off the planet?"

"It seems logical."

"Why just now, Mr Spock? This production facility was established here fifty years ago."

"I do not know, sir." Spock resumed staring at the round object. "But it is perhaps indicative that Mr Appel claimed to have hit it with his phaser. He strikes me as a capable but unimaginative man. If he said he hit it, I tend to believe he did. Why was the creature not affected? I have a suggestion, though Dr McCoy will accuse me of creating fantasies."

"You?" McCoy said. "I doubt it."

"Very well. To begin with, the colonists are equipped only with phaser number one, no need for the more powerful model having been encountered. This instrument, when set to kill, coagulates proteins, which are carbon-based compounds. Suppose this creature's 'organic' compounds are based on silicon instead?"

"Now surely that *is* a fantasy," Kirk said.

"No, it's possible," McCoy said. "Silicon has the same valence as carbon, and a number of simple silicoid 'organics' have been known for a long time. And by the stars, it explains the acids, too. We have hydrochloric acid in our own stomachs, after all. But we're mostly water. Silicon isn't water-soluble, so the aqua regia may be the substrate of the creature's bloodstream. And the hydrofluoric—well, fluorine has an especial affiinity for silicon; the result is teflon, which may be what the creature's internal tubing is made of."

"Do you mean to imply," Kirk said slowly, "that this being goes about killing men with its own blood?"

"Not necessarily, Jim. It may spit the stuff—and sweat it, too, for all I know. Its tunneling suggests that it does."

"Hmm. It also suggests that it would have to have a form of natural armor plating. But our people have phasers number two,

and I defy anything to stand up against that at high power, no matter what it's made of. The question is, how do we locate it?"

"I would suggest," Spock said, "that we start at whatever level these silicon nodules were found."

"Why? How do they tie in?"

"Pure speculation, Captain. But it would be helpful if it were confirmed."

"Very well, assemble security forces. I assume that Mr Scott is already at work on the reactor? Very good, we'll assemble in Vanderberg's office."

"You will each be given a complete chart of all tunnels and diggings under this installation," Kirk told his forces. "You will proceed from level to level, checking out every foot of opening. You will be searching for some variety of creature which apparently is highly resistant to phaser fire, so have your phasers set on maximum. And remember this—fifty people have already been killed. I want no more deaths…"

"Except the bloody thing!" Vanderberg exploded.

Kirk nodded. "The creature may or may not attack on sight. However, you must. A great deal depends on getting this installation back into production."

"Mr Vanderberg," Spock said, "may I ask at which level you discovered the nodules of silicon?"

"The twenty-third. Why?"

"Commander Giotto," Kirk said, "you will take your detail directly to the twenty-third level and start your search from there. Mr Vanderberg, I want all of your people to stay on the top level. Together. In a safe place."

"I don't know any safe place, Captain. The way this thing comes and goes…"

"We'll see what we can do about that. All right, gentlemen. You have your instructions. Let's get at it."

Spock, Kirk, Giotto and two security guards paused on the twenty-third level while Spock adjusted his tricorder. Most of Giotto's men had already fanned out through the tunnels. Kirk pointed to a spot on Giotto's map.

"We are here. You and your guards take this tunnel, which is the only one of this complex that doesn't already have men in it. As you see, they converge up ahead. We'll rendezvous at that point."

"Aye aye, sir." The three disappeared into the darkness. Spock continued to scan.

"A strange sensation," the First Officer said. "There are men all about us, and yet because the tricorder is now set for silicon life, it says we are alone down here. No, not quite."

"Traces?"

"A great many—but they are all extremely old. Many thousands of years old. Yet, again, there are many brand new tunnels down here. It does not relate."

"Perhaps it does," Kirk said thoughtfully. "Not tunnels. Not lava tubes. Highways. Roads. Thoroughfares. Mr Spock, give me an environmental reading, for a thousand yards in any direction."

"Yes, sir—ah. A life-form. Bearing, one hundred eleven degrees, angle of elevation four degrees."

"Not one of our people?"

"No, sir, they would not register."

"Come on!"

They set off quickly, keeping as close on the bearing as the convolutions of the tunnels would allow. Then, ahead, someone screamed—or tried to, for the sound was suddenly cut off. They ran.

A moment later they were looking at a small, blackened lump on the tunnel floor, with a phaser beside it Grimly, Spock picked up the weapon and checked it.

"One of the guards," he said. "He did not have a chance to fire, Captain."

"And it's only been seconds since we heard him scream…"

There was a slithering sound behind them. They whirled together.

In the darkness it was difficult to make out details, except for movement, an undulating crawl forward. The creature was large, low to the ground, somehow worm-like. It was now making another noise, a menacing rattle, like pebbles being shaken in a tin can.

"Look out!" Kirk shouted. "It's charging!"

Both men fired. The monster swung around as the two phaser beams struck its side. With an agonized roar, it leapt backward and vanished.

"After it!"

But the tunnel was empty. It was astonishing that anything of that bulk could move so rapidly. Kirk reached out to touch the wall of the tunnel, then snatched his hand back.

"Mr Spock! These walls are hot."

"Indeed, Captain. The tricorder says it was cut within the last two minutes."

Kirk heard running footsteps, and then Giotto and a guard, phasers at the ready, appeared behind them.

"Are you all right, Captain? That scream…"

"Perfectly, Commander. But one of your men…"

"Yes, I saw. Poor Kelly. Did you see the thing, sir?"

"We saw it. In fact, we took a bite out of it."

Spock bent over, then straightened with a large chunk of something in his hand. "And here it is, Captain."

He handed the stuff to Kirk, who examined it closely. Clearly, it was not animal tissue; it looked more like fibrous asbestos. Obviously, Spock's guess had been right.

"Commander Giotto, it looks as though killing this thing will require massed phasers—or a single phaser with much longer contact. Pass the word to your men. And another thing. We already knew it was a killer. Now it's wounded—probably in pain—back in there somewhere. There's nothing more dangerous than a wounded animal. Keep that in mind."

"The creature is moving rapidly through native rock at bearing two hundred one, eleven hundred yards, elevation angle five degrees," Spock said.

"Right." Giotto and the guard went out, and Kirk started to follow them, but Spock remained standing where he was, looking pensive. Kirk said, "What's troubling you, Mr Spock?"

"Captain, there are literally hundreds of these tunnels in this general area alone. Far too many to be cut by the one creature in an ordinary lifetime."

"We don't know how long it lives."

"No, sir, but its speed of movement indicates a high metabolic rate. That is not compatible with a lifetime much longer than ours."

"Perhaps not," Kirk said. "I fail to see what bearing that has on our problem."

"I mention it, Captain, because if this is the only survivor of a dead race, to kill it would be a crime against science."

"Our concern is the protection of this colony, Mr Spock. And to get pergium production moving again. This is not a zoological expedition."

"Quite so, Captain. Still…"

"Keep your tricorder active. Maintain a constant reading on the creature. We'll try to use the existing tunnels to cut it off. If we have to, we'll use our phasers to cut our own tunnels." Kirk paused, then added more gently, "I'm sorry, Mr Spock, I'm afraid it must die."

"Sir, if the opportunity arose to capture it instead…"

"I will lose no more men, Mr Spock. The creature will be killed on sight. That's the end of it."

"Very well, sir."

But Kirk was not satisfied. Killing came hard to them all, but Spock in particular was sometimes inclined to hold his fire when his conservation instincts, or his scientific curiosity, were aroused. After a moment, Kirk added, "Mr Spock, I want you to return to the surface, to assist Mr Scott in the maintenance of his makeshift circulating pump."

Spock's eyebrows went up. "I beg your pardon, Captain?"

"You heard me. It's vital that we keep that reactor in operation. Your scientific knowledge…"

"? is not needed there. Mr Scott knows far more about reactors than I do. You are aware of that."

After another pause, Kirk said; "very well. I am in command of the *Enterprise.* You are second in command. This hunt will be dangerous. Either one of us, by himself, is expendable. Both of us are not."

"I will, of course, follow your orders, Captain," Spock said. "But we are dealing with a grave scientific problem right here, so on those grounds, this is where I should be, not with Mr Scott. Besides, sir, there are approximately one hundred of us engaged in this search, against one creature. The odds against both you and me being killed are—" there was a very slight pause, "two hundred twenty-six point eight to one."

Not for the first time, Kirk found himself outgunned. "Those are good odds. Very well, you may stay. But keep out of trouble, Mr Spock."

"That is always my intention, Captain."

Kirk's communicator beeped, and he flipped it open. "Kirk here."

"Scotty, Captain. My brilliant improvisation just gave up the ghost. It couldn't take the strain."

"Can you fix it again?"

"Nay, Captain. It's gone for good."

"Very well. Start immediate evacuation of all colonists to the *Enterprise.*"

Vanderberg's voice came through. "Not all of them, Captain. Me and some of my key personnel are staying. We'll be down to join you."

"We don't have phasers enough for all of you."

"Then we'll use clubs," Vanderberg's voice said. "But we won't be chased away from here. My people take orders from me, not from you."

Kirk thought fast. "Very well. Get everybody else on board the ship. The fewer people we have breathing the air, the longer the rest of us can hold out. How long is that, Scotty?"

"It's got naught to do with the air, Captain. The reactor will go supercritical in about ten hours. You'll have to find your beastie well before then."

"Right. Feed us constant status reports, Scotty. Mr Vanderberg, you and your men assemble on level twenty-three, checkpoint Tiger. There you'll team up with *Enterprise* security personnel. They're better armed than you are, so stay in sight of one of them at all times—buddy system. Mr Spock and I will control all operations by communicator. Understood—and agreed?"

"Both," Vanderberg's voice said grimly. "Suicide is no part of my plans."

"Good. Kirk out… Mr Spock, you seem to have picked up something."

"Yes, Captain. The creature is now quiescent a few thousand yards from here, in that direction."

Kirk took a quick look at his chart. "The map says these two tunnels converge there. Take the left one, Mr Spock. I'll go to the right."

"Should we separate?"

"Two tunnels," Kirk said. "Two of us. We separate."

"Very well, Captain," Spock said, but his voice was more than a little dubious. But it couldn't be helped. Kirk moved down the right-hand tunnel, slowly and tensely.

The tunnel turned, and Kirk found himself in a small chamber, streaked with bright strata quite unlike the rest of the rock around

him. Imbedded in there were dozens of round objects like the one Vanderberg had on his desk, or the one which had so fascinated Spock. He lifted his communicator again. "Mr Spock."

"Yes, Captain."

"I've found a whole layer of those silicon nodules of yours."

"Indeed, Captain. Most illuminating. Captain—be absolutely certain you do not damage any of them."

"Explain."

"It is only a theory, Captain, but…" His voice was drowned out by the roar of hundreds of tons of collapsing rock and debris. Kirk threw himself against the wall, choking clouds of dust rising around him. When he could see again, it was evident that the roof of the tunnel had fallen across the way he had just come.

"Captain! Are you all right? Captain!"

"Yes, Mr Spock. Quite all right. But we seem to have had a cave-in."

"I can phaser you out," Spock's voice said. "No, any disturbance would bring the rest of the wall down. Anyway, it isn't necessary. The chart said our tunnels meet further on. I can just walk out."

"Very well. But I find it disquieting that your roof chose to collapse at that moment. Please proceed with extreme caution. I shall double my pace."

"Very well, Mr Spock. I'll meet you at the end of the tunnel. Kirk out."

As he tucked the communicator away, there came from behind him a sound as of pebbles being shaken in a can.

He spun instantly, but it was too late. The way was blocked.

It was his first clear sight of the creature, which was reared in the center of the tunnel. It was huge, shaggy, multicolored, and knobby with objects which might have been heads, sense organs, hands—Kirk could not tell. It was quivering gently, still making that strange noise.

Kirk whipped up his phaser. At once the creature shuffled backward. Was it now afraid of just one gun? He raised the weapon again, but this time the creature retreated no further. Neither did it advance.

Phaser at the ready, Kirk moved toward the animal, trying to get around it. At once, it moved to block him—not threateningly, as far as Kirk could tell, but just getting in his way.

Spock chose this moment to call him again. "Captain, a new reading shows the creature…"

"I know exactly where the creature is," Kirk said, his phaser steadily on it. "Standing about ten feet away from me."

"Kill it, Captain! Quickly!"

"It's—not making any threatening moves, Mr Spock."

"You don't dare take the chance! Kill it!"

"I thought you were the one who wanted it kept alive," Kirk said, with grim amusement. "Captured, if possible."

"Your life is in danger, Captain. You can't take the risk."

"It seems to be waiting for something. I want to find out what. I'll shoot if I have to."

"Very well, Captain. I will hurry through my tunnel and approach it from the rear. I remind you that it is a proven killer. Spock out."

The creature was silent now. Kirk lowered his phaser a trifle, but there was no reaction.

"All right," Kirk said. "What do we do now? Talk it over?"

He really had not expected an answer, nor did he get one. He took a step forward and to one side. Again the creature moved to block him; and as it did, Kirk saw along one of its flanks a deep, ragged gouge, leaving a glistening, rocklike surface exposed. It was obviously a wound.

"Well, you can be hurt, can't you?" He lifted the phaser again. The creature rattled, and shrank back, but held its ground. Obviously it was afraid of the weapon, but it would not flee.

Kirk lowered the phaser, and the rattling stopped. Then he moved deliberately back against the nearest wall and dropped slowly into a squatting position, the phaser held loosely between his knees.

"All right. Your move. Or do we just sit and wait for something to happen?"

It was not a long wait. Almost at once, Spock burst into the area from the open end of the tunnel. He took in the situation instantly and his own phaser jerked up.

"Don't shoot!" Kirk shouted. Echoes went bounding away through the galleries and tunnels.

Spock looked from one to the other. As he did so, the creature moved slowly to the other side of the tunnel. Kirk guessed that he could get past it now before it could block him again. Instead, he said, "Come on over, Mr Spock."

With the utmost caution, his highly interested eyes fastened on the creature, Spock moved to Kirk's side. He looked up at the walls in which the silicon nodules were imbedded. "Logical," he said.

"But what do they mean?"

"I'd rather not say just yet. If I could possibly get into Vulcan mind-lock with that creature—it would be easier if I could touch it…"

Before Kirk could even decide whether to veto this notion, Spock stepped toward the animal, his hand extended. It lurched back at once, its rattling loud and angry-sounding.

"Too bad," Spock said. "But obviously it will permit no contact. Well, then, I must do it the hard way. If you will be patient, Captain…"

Spock's eyes closed as he began to concentrate. The intense mental power he was summoning was almost physically visible. Kirk held his breath. The creature twitched nervously, uneasily.

Suddenly Spock's face contorted hi agony, and he screamed. "The pain! The pain!" With a great shudder, his face ashen, he began to fall; Kirk got to him just in time.

"Thank—you, Captain," Spock said, gasping and steadying himself. "I am sorry—but that is all I got. Just waves and waves of searing pain. Oh, and a name. It calls itself a Horta. It is in great agony because of the wound—but not reacting at all like a wounded animal."

Abruptly, the creature slithered forward to a smooth expanse of floor, and clung there for a moment. Then it moved away. Where it had been, etched into the floor in still smoking letters, were the words: NO KILL I. Both men stared at the sentence in astonishment.

" 'No kill I' "? Kirk said. "What's that? It could be a plea to us not to kill it—or a promise that it won't kill us."

"I don't know. It appears it learned more from me during our empathy than I did from it. But observe, Captain, that it thinks in vocables. That means it can hear, too."

"Horta!" Kirk said loudly. The creature rattled at once and then returned to silence.

"Mr Spock, I hate to do this to you, but—it suddenly occurs to me that the Horta couldn't have destroyed that perfusion pump. It was platinum, and immune to the acid mix. It must have hidden it somewhere—and we have to get it back. You'll have to re-establish communications, no matter how painful it is."

"Certainly, Captain," Spock said promptly. "But it has no reason to give us the device—and apparently every reason to wish us off the planet."

"I'm aware of that. If we can win its confidence…"

Kirk took out his communicator. "Dr McCoy. This is the Captain."

"Yes, Captain," McCoy's voice answered.

"Get your medical kit and get down here on the double. We've got a patient for you."

"Somebody injured? How?"

"I can't specify, it's beyond my competence. Just come. Twenty-third level; find us by tricorder. And hurry. Kirk out."

"I remind you, Captain," Spock said. "This is a silicon-based form of life. Dr McCoy's medical knowledge may be totally useless."

"He's a healer. Let him heal. All right, go ahead, Mr Spock. Try to contact it again. And try to find out why it suddenly took to murder."

The creature moved nervously as Spock approached it, but did not shy off; it merely quivered, and made its warning pebble-sound. Speck's eyes closed, and the rattling slowly died back.

Kirk's communicator beeped again. "Kirk here."

"Giotto, Captain. Are you all right?"

"Perfectly all right. Where are you?"

"We're at the end of the tunnel. Mr Vanderberg and his men are here. They're pretty ugly. I thought I'd check with you first…"

"Hold them there, Commander. Under no circumstances allow them in here yet. The minute Dr McCoy gets there, send him through."

"Aye aye, sir. Giotto out."

Spock was now deep in trance. He began to murmur.

"Pain… pain… Murder… the thousands… devils… Eternity ends… horrible… horrible… in the Chamber of the Ages… the Altar of Tomorrow… horrible… Murderers… Murderers…"

"Mr Spock! The pump…"

"Stop them… kill… strike back… monsters…"

There was the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps and Dr McCoy, medical bag in hand, broke through into the area. Then he stopped, obviously stunned at what he saw. Kirk silently signaled him to join them, and McCoy, giving the quiescent creature a wide berth, moved to Kirk's side. He said in a low whisper, "What in the name of…"

"It's wounded—badly," Kirk whispered back. "You've got to help it."

"Help—*this?*"

"Take a look at it."

McCoy cautiously approached the creature, which was now as immobile as a statue; nor did Spock take any notice.

"The end of life… the murderers… killing… the dead children…"

McCoy stared at the gaping wound, and then touched it tentatively here and there. Producing his tricorder, he took a reading, at which he stared in disbelief. Then he came back to Kirk, his face indignant.

"You can't be serious. That thing is virtually made out of stone on the outside, and its guts are plastics."

"Help it. Treat it."

"I'm a doctor, not a bricklayer!"

"You're a healer," Kirk said. "That's your patient. That's an order, Doctor."

McCoy shook his head in wonder, but moved back toward the animal. Spock's eyes were still closed, his face sweating with effort. Kirk went to him.

"Spock. Tell it we're trying to help. A doctor."

"Understood. Understood. It is the end of Life. Eternity stops. Go out. Into the tunnel. To the Passage of Immortality. To the Chamber of the Ages. Cry for the children. Walk carefully in the Vault of Tomorrow. Sorrow for the murdered children. Weep for the crushed ones. Tears for the stolen ones. The thing you search for is there. Go. Go. Sadness for the end of things."

Kirk could not tell whether he was being given directions, or only eavesdropping upon a meditation. He looked hesitantly toward the tunnel entrance.

"Go!" Spock said. "Into the tunnel. There is a small passage. Quickly. Quickly. Sorrow… such sorrow. Sadness. Pain." There were tears running down his cheeks now. "Sorrow… the dead… the children…"

Kirk felt a thrill of sympathy. He did not in the least understand this litany, but no one could hear so many emotionally loaded words chanted in circumstances of such tension without reacting.

But the directions turned out to be clear enough. Within a minute he was able to return, the pump in one hand, a silicon nodule in the other.

McCoy was kneeling by the flank of the animal, and speaking into his communicator. "That's right, Lieutenant. Beam it down to me immediately. Never mind what I want it for, I just want it. Move!"

"The ages die," Spock said. "It is time to sleep. It is over. Failure. The murderers have won. Death is welcome. Let it end here, with the murdered children…"

"Mr Spock!" Kirk called. "Come back! Spock!"

Spock shuddered with the effort to disengage himself. Kirk carefully put the pump on the floor of the tunnel, then waited until Spock's eyes were no longer glazed.

"I found the unit," Kirk said. "It's in good shape. I also found about a thousand of these silicon balls. They're—eggs, aren't they, Mr Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. Eggs. And about to hatch."

"The miners must have broken into the hatchery. Their operations destroyed hundreds of them. No wonder…"

There was a roar of sound, and Vanderberg, Appel and what seemed to be an army of armed civilians were trying to jam themselves into the tunnel. They shouted in alarm as they saw the creature. Phasers were raised. Kirk jumped forward.

"No!" he shouted. "Don't shoot!"

"Kill it, kill it!" Appel yelled.

Kirk raised his own weapon. "The first man who shoots, dies."

"You can't mean it," Vanderberg said, pointing at the Horta with a finger quivering with hatred. "That thing has killed fifty of my men!"

"And you've killed hundreds of her children," Kirk said quietly.

"What?"

"Those 'silicon nodules' you've been collecting and destroying are eggs. Tell them, Mr Spock."

"There have been many generations of Horta on this planet," Spock said. "Every fifty thousand years the entire race dies—all but one, like this one. But the eggs live. She protects them, cares for them, and when they hatch, she is the mother to them—thousands of them. This creature here is the mother of her race."

"She's intelligent, peaceful and mild," Kirk added. "She had no objection to sharing the planet with you people—until you broke into the nursery and started destroying her eggs. Then she fought back, in the only way she could—as any mother would—when her children were endangered."

"How were we to know?" Vanderberg said, chastened and stunned. "But—you mean if those eggs hatch, there'll be thousands of them crawling around down here? We've got pergium to deliver!"

"And now you've got your reactor pump back," Kirk said. "She gave it back. You've complained that this planet is a minerological treasure house, if only you had the equipment to get at everything. Well, the Horta moves through rock the way we move through air—and leaves a tunnel. The greatest natural miners in the universe.

"I don't see why we can't make an agreement—reach a *modus vivendi.* They tunnel, you collect and process. You get along together. Your processing operation would be a thousand times more profitable than it is now."

"Sounds all right," Vanderberg said, still a little dubiously. "But how do you know the thing will go for it?"

"Why should it not?" Spock said. "It is logical. But there is one problem. It is badly wounded. It may die."

McCoy rose to his feet, a broad smile on his face. "It won't die. By golly, I'm beginning to think I can cure a rainy day."

"You cured it?" Kirk said in amazement. "How?"

"I had the ship beam down ten pounds of thermo-concrete, the kind we build emergency shelters out of. It's mostly silicon. I just troweled it over the wound. It'll act as a 'bandage' until it heals of itself. Take a look. Good as new."

"Bones, my humblest congratulations. Mr Spock, I'll have to ask you to get in contact with the Horta again. Tell it our proposition. She and her children make all the tunnels they want. Our people will remove the minerals, and each side will leave the other alone. Think she'll go for it?"

"As I said, Captain, it seems logical. The Horta has a very logical mind." He paused a moment. "And after years of close association with humans, I find it curiously refreshing."

ERRAND OF MERCY

(Gene L Coon)

The Klingon scout ship must have known that it was no match whatsoever for the *Enterprise*—after all, the Klingons were experts in such matters. But it fired on the *Enterprise* anyhow as Kirk's ship approached Organia.

The Federation ship's phasers promptly blew the scout into very small flinders, but the attack was a measure of the Klingons' determination to bar the Federation from using Organia as a base. Organia was of no intrinsic value to either side—largely farmland, worked by a people with neither any skill at, nor interest in, fighting—but strategically it was the only Class M planet in the disputed zone, over which negotiations had already broken down. It was, Kirk thought, another Armenia, another Belgium—the weak innocents who always turn out to be located on a natural invasion route.

And the scout ship had had plenty of time to get off a message before opening fire. It had to be assumed that a Klingon fleet was now on the way, if there hadn't been one on the way already. That left very little time for negotiating with the Organians.

Leaving Sulu in charge of the *Enterprise*—with strict orders to cut and run if any Klingon fleet showed up—Kirk and Spock beamed down. The street in which they arrived might have been that of any English village of the thirteenth century: thatched roofs, a few people wearing rude homespun, a brace of oxen pulling a crude wagon. In the distance, something that looked like a ruined castle or fortress, old and decayed, but massive, glowered over the village—an odd construction for a culture that was supposed to have no history of warfare. As for the passersby, they paid no attention to the two starship officers, as if they were used to seeing men beaming down every day. That too seemed rather unlikely.

When the reception committee finally arrived, however, it was cordial enough. It consisted of three smiling, elderly men in fur-trimmed robes, who introduced themselves as Ayelborne, Trefayne

and Claymare. Kirk and Spock were received in a small room with roughly plastered walls and no decorations, and containing only a rude table flanked by plain chairs.

Spock lowered his tricorder. "Absolutely no energy output anywhere," he murmured to the Captain. Kirk nodded; the report only confirmed his own impression. This was not a medieval culture making progress toward mechanization, as the original reports had indicated. It was totally stagnant—a laboratory specimen of an arrested culture. Most peculiar.

"My government," he told the smiling Organians, "has informed me that the Klingons are expected to move against your planet, with the objective of making it a base of operations against our Federation. My mission, frankly, is to try to keep them from doing this."

"What you are saying," Ayelborne said, "is that we seem to have a choice between dealing with you or your enemies." In another context the words might have seemed hostile, but Ayelborne was still smiling.

"No, sir. With the Federation you will have a choice. You will have none with the Klingons. They are a military dictatorship, to which war is a way of life. We offer you protection."

"Thank you," Ayelborne said. "But we do not need your protection. We have nothing anyone could want."

"You have this planet, and its strategic location. If you don't move to prevent it, the Klingons will move in, just as surely as your sun sets. We'll help you with your defenses, build facilities?"

"We have no defenses, Captain, nor are any needed," the man called Claymare said.

"Excuse me, but you're wrong. I've seen what the Klingons do to planets like yours. They are organized into vast slave labor camps. You'll have no freedom whatsoever. Your goods will be confiscated. Hostages will be taken and killed. Your leaders will be confined. You'd be better off on a penal planet."

"Captain," Ayelborne said, "we see that your concern is genuine, and we appreciate it. But again we assure you that there is absolutely no danger?"

"I assure you that there is! Do you think I'm lying? Why?"

"You did not let me finish," Ayelborne said gently. "I was going to say, there is no danger to ourselves. You and your friend are in danger, certainly. It would be best for you to return to your ship as soon as possible."

"Gentlemen, I beg you to reconsider. We can be of immense help to you. In addition to the military assistance, we can send in technicians, specialists. We can show you how to feed a thousand people where you fed one before. We'll build schools and help you educate your young, teach them what we know—your public facilities seem to be almost nonexistent. We could remake your world, end disease, hunger, hardship. But we are forbidden to help you if you refuse to be helped."

"A moving plea," Trefayne said. "But?"

He was interrupted by the beeping of Kirk's communicator. "Excuse me, sir," he said. "Kirk here."

"Captain," said Sum's voice. "A large number of Klingon vessels just popped out of subspace around us. I didn't get a count before they opened fire but there must be at least twenty. My screens are up now, and I can't drop them to beam you aboard."

"You're not supposed to," Kirk said harshly. "Your orders are to run for it and contact the fleet. Come back only if you've got better odds. Mark and move!"

He switched off and stared at the three Organians.

"You kept insisting that there was no danger. Now?"

"We are already aware of the Klingon fleet," Trefayne said. "There are in fact eight more such vessels now assuming orbit around our planet."

"Can you verify that, Spock?"

"No, sir, not at this distance," Spock said. "But it seems a logical development."

"Ah," Trefayne added. "Several hundred armed men have just appeared near the citadel."

Spock aimed his tricorder in that direction and nodded. "Not just hand weapons, either," he said. "I am picking up three or four pieces of heavy-duty equipment. How did he know that so quickly, I wonder?"

"That doesn't matter now," Kirk said grimly. "What matters is that we're stranded here, right in the middle of the Klingon occupation army."

"So it would seem, sir," Spock said. "Not a pleasant prospect."

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "you have a gift for understatement."

The Klingons were hard-faced, hard-muscled men, originally of Oriental stock. They were indeed heavily armed and wore what

looked like vests of mail. They moved purposefully and efficiently through the streets, posting guards as they went. The few Organians they met smiled at them and moved quietly, passively out of their way.

To compound Kirk's bafflement, the uncooperative Organian council—if that is what the three men were—had provided him and Spock with Organian clothing and offered to conceal them, an offer entailing colossal risks. Then, rummaging through the discarded uniforms, Kirk demanded suddenly: "Where are our weapons?"

"We took them, Captain," Ayelborne said. "We cannot permit violence here. Claymare, remove the uniforms. No, we will have to protect you ourselves. Mr Spock presents the chief problem. He will have to pose as a Vulcan trader—perhaps here to deal in kevas and trillium."

"They're aware that Vulcan is a member of the Federation," Kirk said.

"But harmless to the Klingons. You, Captain, might well be an Organian citizen, if?"

He got no further. The door flew open, and two Klingon soldiers burst in, gesturing with handguns for everyone to back up. They were followed by a third Klingon, an erect, proud man, who did not need his commander's insignia to show who he was.

Spock and the Organians retreated; Kirk stood his ground. The Klingon commander looked quickly around the room.

"*This* is the ruling council?" he said contemptuously.

Ayelborne stepped forward again, smiling. "I am Ayelborne, temporary council head. I bid you welcome."

"No doubt you do. I am Kor, military governor of Organia." He glared at Kirk. "Who are you?"

"He is Baroner," Ayelborne said. "One of our leading citizens. This is Trefayne?"

"This Baroner has no tongue?"

"I have a tongue," Kirk said.

"Good. When I address you, you will answer. Where is your smile?"

"My what?"

"The stupid, idiotic smile everyone else seems to be wearing." Kor swung on Spock. "A Vulcan. Do you also have a tongue?"

"My name is Spock. I am a dealer in kevas and trillium."

"You don't look like a storekeeper. What is trillium?"

Spock said smoothly, and with an impassive face: "A medicinal plant of the lily family."

"Not on Organia, it isn't," Kor said. "Obviously a Federation spy. Take him to the examination room."

"He's no spy," Kirk said angrily.

"Well, well," Kor said. "Have we a ram among the sheep? Why do you object to us taking him? He's not even human."

Kirk caught the warning glance Spock was trying to disguise and made a major effort to control himself as well. "He has done nothing, that's all."

"Coming from an Organian, yours is practically an act of rebellion. Very good. They welcome me. Do you also welcome me?"

"You're here," Kirk said. "I can't do anything about it."

Kor stared hard at him, and then permitted himself a faint smile. "Good honest hatred," he said. "Very refreshing. However, it makes no difference whether you welcome me or not. I am here and I will stay. You are now subjects of the Klingon Empire. You will find there are many rules and regulations, which will be posted. Violation of the smallest of them will be punished by death; we will have no time for justice just now."

"Your regulations will be obeyed," Ayelborne said.

Kirk felt his mouth tightening. Kor saw it; apparently he missed very little. He said: "You disapprove, Baroner?"

"Do you need my approval?"

"I need your obedience, nothing more," Kor said softly. "Will I have it?"

"You seem to be in command," Kirk said, shrugging.

"How true." Kor began to pace. "Now. I shall need a representative from among you, liaison between the forces of occupation and the civilian population. I don't trust men who smile too much. Baroner, you are appointed."

"Me?" Kirk said. "I don't want the job."

"Have I asked whether or not you wanted it? As for the rest of you—we Klingons have a reputation for ruthlessness. You will find that it is deserved. Should one Klingon soldier be killed here, a thousand Organians will die. I will have *order*, is that clear?"

"Commander," Ayelborne said, "I assure you we will cause you no trouble."

"No. I am sure you will not. Baroner, come with me."

"What about Mr Spock?"

"Why are you concerned?"

"He's my friend."

"You have poor taste in friends. He will be examined. If he is lying, he will die. If he is telling the truth, well, he will find that business has taken a turn for the worse. Guards, remove him."

The guards, covering Spock with their weapons, gestured him out the door; Spock went meekly. Kirk started after him, only to be shoved back by Kor himself. Kirk could not help flushing, but Kor only nodded.

"You do not like to be pushed," the Klingon said. "Good. At least you are a man I can understand. Come with me."

Kor had set up shop in the citadel Kirk and Spock had seen on their first arrival. Seen close up, and from inside, the impression it gave of vast age was intensified. Kor had furnished one room with a large Klingon insignia, a desk, one chair, and nothing else; Kirk stood. Kor signed a document and thrust it across the desk at him.

"For duplication and posting," he said. "From this day on, no public assemblages of more than three people. All publications to be cleared through this office. Neighborhood controls will be established. Hostages selected. A somewhat lengthy list of crimes against the state."

Kirk glanced impassively at the list, aware that Kor as usual was watching him closely. The commander said: "You do not like them?"

"Did you expect me to?"

Kor only grinned. At the same time, the door opened and Spock was thrust inside, followed by a Klingon lieutenant. To Kirk's enormous relief, his first officer looked perfectly normal.

"Well, lieutenant?"

"He is what he claims to be, Commander," the lieutenant said. "A Vulcan trader named Spock. And he really is trading in the other kind of trillium, the vegetable kind; it seems it has value here."

"Nothing else?"

"The usual apprehension. His main concern seems to be how he will carry on his business under our occupation. His mind is so undisciplined that he could hold nothing back."

"All right. Baroner, would you like to try our little truth-finder?"

"I don't even understand it."

"It's a mind-sifter," Kor said, "or a mind-ripper, depending on how much force is used. If necessary, we can empty a man's mind as if opening a spigot. Of course, what's left is more vegetable than human."

"You're proud of it?" Kirk said.

"All war weapons are unpleasant," Kor said. "Otherwise they would be useless."

"Mr Spock, are you sure you're all right?"

"Perfectly, Baroner. However, it was a remarkable sensation."

"That's enough," Kor said, with a trace of suspicion in his voice. "Vulcan, you can go. But just bear in mind that you're an enemy alien, and will be under scrutiny at all times."

"Quite, Commander," Spock said. "I understand you very well."

"Baroner, return to your council and get that proclamation posted. Until the people know what's expected of them, it's up to you to keep the people in order."

"Or I will be killed," Kirk said.

"Precisely. I see that you too understand me very well."

Once in the street, Kirk glanced about quickly. Nobody was within earshot, or seemed to be following them. He said quietly to Spock, "That mind-sifter of theirs must not be quite the terror they think it is."

"I advise you not to underestimate it, Captain," Spock said. "I was able to resist it, partly with a little Vulcan discipline, partly by misdirection. But on the next higher setting, I am sure I would have been unable to protect myself."

"And I wouldn't last even that long. The question is now, how do we persuade these Organians to resist? To strike back, knock the Klingons off balance, maybe until the Federation fleet gets here?"

"Verbal persuasion seems to be ineffective," Spock said. "Perhaps a more direct approach?"

"My thought exactly. Didn't I see something that looked like a munitions dump near the citadel? I thought so. All right, let's try a little direct communication."

"The suggestion has merit. Would tonight do?"

"If you have no previous engagement," Kirk said. "Of course, we're short of tools."

"I am sure," Spock said, "the Klingons will provide whatever is necessary."

"It's a pleasure doing business with you, Mr Spock."

The guards at the munitions depot were tough and highly trained, but nothing they had yet encountered on Organia had prepared them for anyone like Kirk and Spock. Two of them went quietly to sleep on duty within a few seconds of each other, were relieved of their phasers and locked in an empty storeroom, lovingly cocooned in baling wire.

Inside the dump, Kirk located a crate that seemed to contain some form of chemical explosive. He opened it. A few moments later, Spock appeared from the shadows.

"I have one of their sonic grenades," he murmured, "and I have improvised a delayed-action fuse. The combination should provide a most satisfactory display."

"Good. Fire away."

Spock made a pulling gesture, carefully tucked the grenade inside the crate, and ran, Kirk at his heels.

Three minutes later, the night lit up. Giant explosions rocked it, followed by strings of subsidiary explosions. Missiles flew in all directions. An immense cloud formed over the city, its underside flickering with the fires and detonations below it.

"You were right, Mr Spock," Kirk said when the clamor had begun to die down. "A most satisfactory display. I only hope that the council draws the moral. Obviously they can't fight the Klingons directly, but they could make Organia useless to them."

"In the meantime," Spock said. "I earnestly suggest that we find ourselves a deep, deep hole, Captain. Somehow I cannot think that Commander Kor will believe the Organians did this."

"Nor do I. Let's vanish."

Perhaps one or both of them should have anticipated Kor's next move. Two hours later, in an empty, lightless hut near the outskirts of the village, they heard a distant, buzzing whine from the direction of the citadel.

"Phasers," Spock said.

"Yes, Klingon phasers—a lot of them, all being fired at once. Odd. It doesn't sound at all like a battle, or even a riot."

The answer came rumbling down the street outside within another hour, in the form of an armored vehicle. From a loudspeaker atop it, a recorded voice was bellowing: "This is the military governor. In the courtyard of my headquarters, two hundred Organian hostages have just been killed. In two hours more, two hundred more will die, and two hundred more after that —until the two Federation spies are turned over to us. The blood of the hostages is on your hands. The executions will be carried on until the saboteurs are surrendered. This is the order of Kor. Attention, all subjects! This is the military governor. In the courtyard of my headquarters?"

Kirk and Spock were silent for a long time after the lumbering vehicle had become inaudible. At last Kirk whispered, appalled: "That tears it."

"Yes, Captain. And the Organians no more know where we are than Kor does. We must give ourselves up, and speedily."

"Wait a minute. Let me think."

"But all those lives?"

"I know, I know. We've got to turn ourselves in. But we've still got sidearms. Just possibly, we can force Kor to call the killings off."

"Unlikely, Captain," Spock said. "Commander Kor may be a mass murderer, but he is clearly also a soldier."

"In that case, we'll just have to do as much damage as we can and keep them busy until the fleet shows up. The Federation invested a lot of money in our training, Mr Spock. I think they're about due for a small return."

Spock estimated the odds against making it all the way to Kor's office at "approximately" 7,824.7 to one; but surprise and the phasers—set to heavy stun force—both told in their favor. When they reached the door of Kor's office, it was open, and no alarm had sounded. They could see the commander inside, seated at his desk, hands over his face, brooding. It seemed almost possible that he did not relish butchering unarmed civilians. When he looked up and saw Spock and Kirk before him, phasers leveled, a look of interest and appreciation appeared on his face.

"Just stay seated, Commander," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, cover the door."

"You have done well to get this far, through my guards."

"I am afraid," Spock said, "that many of them are no longer in perfect operating condition."

"The fortunes of war. What next?"

"We're here. Call off your executions."

"You have not surrendered," Kor said in a reasonable tone of voice. "Drop your weapons and I will call off the executions. Otherwise you have accomplished nothing."

"We can certainly kill you," Kirk said grimly. "You're the Klingon governor. That might put quite a crimp in your operations."

"Don't be hasty," Kor said. "You will be interested in knowing that a Federation fleet is due here within the hour. Our fleet is prepared to meet them. Shall we wait and see the results before you pull the trigger?"

"I don't plan to pull it at all unless you force me to."

"Sheer sentimentality—or at best, mercy. A useless emotion in wartime. It is not a Klingon weakness." Kor smiled. "Think of it. While we talk here, in space above us the destiny of the galaxy will be decided for the next ten thousand years. May I offer you a drink? We can toast the victory of the Klingon fleet."

"I would suggest that you are premature," Spock said. "There are many possibilities."

"Commander," Kirk added, "we once had a nation on Earth called the Spartans—the finest warriors who ever walked our planet. They had their hour of conquest—but it was their chief opponent, Athens, who survived. Sparta knew only the arts of war. Athens was known as the mother of all the arts."

"A consoling analogy, but I think a little out of date," Kor said. "True, there is always some element of chance in a major war. Today we conquer; someday we may be defeated. But I am inclined to doubt it."

He rose. The phaser in Kirk's hand did not waver by a millimeter. Kor ignored it.

"Do you know why we are so strong?" Kor said. "Because we are a unit. Each of us is part of the greater whole. Always under surveillance. Even a commander like myself, always under surveillance, Captain. As you will note."

He waved toward the ceiling, smiling. Kirk did not look up.

"No doubt there's a scanner up there. However, Mr Spock has the door covered, and I have you. At the first disturbance, I fire."

There was something remarkably like a yelp of dismay from Spock, and then the unmistakable sound of a phaser hitting the

stone floor. Kirk whirled, trying to keep Kor simultaneously in the corner of his eye. At the same instant the door, which Spock had closed, burst open again and two Klingon soldiers charged in.

Kirk pulled the trigger. The phaser did not fire. Instead, it turned red hot in his hand. Instinctively, he threw it from him.

"Shoot!" Kor shouted. "Shoot, you blockheads!" There were at least five soldiers in the room now, but one after another they too dropped their weapons, which lay glowing quietly against the stone. After a moment of dismay, the guards charged. Kirk set himself and swung.

He could feel the flesh of his fist sear as it hit. A Klingon grabbed him from behind—then let go with a howl.

"Their *bodies* are hot!" one of the soldiers gasped. He was almost drowned out by a roar from the commander, who had tried to pick up a paper knife.

After that, for an eternal ten seconds, the enemies simply glared at each other incredulously. There was no sound but that of heavy breathing.

Then Ayelborne and Claymare came in. They were wearing their eternal smiles, which even Kirk had come to loathe.

"We are terribly sorry that we have been forced to interfere, gentlemen," Ayelborne said. "But we could not permit you to harm one another. There has been enough violence already."

"What are you talking about, you sheep?"

"We have put a stop to your brawling," Claymare said. "That is all."

"Let me get this straight," Kirk said slowly. "*You* put a stop to it? You? You mean you're going to slap our wrists?"

"Please, Captain," Claymare said. "You already know the answer. Not only your guns, but all instruments of destruction on this planet now have a potential surface temperature of three hundred and fifty degrees. Simple intent to use one renders it inoperative."

"My fleet?" Kor said.

"The same conditions exist upon both the opposing Starfleets," said Ayelborne. "There will be no battle."

"Ridiculous," Kor growled.

"I suggest you contact them. You too, Captain. Your ship is now within range of your communications device."

Kirk took out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Come in."

"Captain! Is that you?"

"Kirk here—report, Mr Sulu."

"I don't know what to report, sir," Sulu's voice said. "We were just closing with the Klingon fleet when every control in the ship became too hot to handle. All except the communications board. If this is some new Klingon weapon, why didn't it disable that too?"

"I don't know," Kirk said heavily. "Stand by, Mr Sulu. Ayelborne, how did you manage this?"

"I could not explain it to you with any hope of being understood, Captain. Suffice it to say that as I stand here, I also stand upon the bridge of your ship, upon the bridge of every ship, upon the home planet of the Klingon Empire, on the home planet of your Federation. Some of my energies I share with your weapons—I and the rest of my people. We are putting a stop to this insane war."

"How dare you?" Kor shouted.

"You can't just stop our fleet," Kirk said, equally angrily. "You've got no right?"

"What happens in space is none of your business?"

"It is being stopped," Ayelborne said. "Unless both sides agree to an immediate cessation of hostilities, all your armed forces, wherever they may be, will be totally disabled."

"We have legitimate grievances against the Klingons," Kirk said. "They've invaded our territory, killed our citizens?"

"The disputed areas are not your territory," Kor raged. "You were trying to hem us in, cut off vital supplies, strangle our trade."

"Look here," Kirk said to the Organians, fighting himself back to some semblance of control. "We didn't ask you to intervene, but you should be the first to side with us now. The two hundred hostages who were killed?"

"No one has died, Captain," Claymare said calmly. "No one has died here for uncounted thousands of years. Nor do we mean that anyone shall."

"Let me ask you, Captain, what it is that you are defending," Ayelborne added, gently, as if amused. "Is it the right to wage war? To kill millions of innocent people? To destroy life on a planetary scale? Is that the 'right' you refer to?"

"Well, I?" Kirk said, and stopped. "Of course, nobody wants war, but sometimes you have to fight. Eventually, I suppose, we?"

"Yes, eventually you would make peace," Ayelborne said. "But only after millions had died. We are bringing it about now. The fact

is, in the future you and the Klingons will become fast friends. You will work together in great harmony."

"Nonsense!" Kor said. Kirk realized that he had been standing shoulder to shoulder with the Klingon and moved away hastily.

"Of course, you are most discordant now," Ayelborne said. "In fact, you will have to leave. The mere presence of beings like yourselves is acutely painful to us."

"What do you mean?" Kirk said. "You don't differ significantly from us, no matter what tricks you've mastered."

"Once we did not differ significantly," Claymare said. "But that was millions of years ago. Now we have developed beyond the need for physical bodies at all. This appearance is only for your convenience. Now we shall put it off."

"Hypnosis!" Kor cried. "Captain, those weapons may never have been hot at all! Grab them!"

Ayelborne and Claymare only smiled, and then they began to change. At first it was only a glow, becoming brighter and brighter, until they looked like metal statues in a furnace. Then the human shape faded. It was as if there were two suns in the room.

Kirk shut his eyes and covered them with both arms. He could still see the light. Finally, however, it began to fade.

The Organians were gone.

"Fascinating," Spock said. "Pure thought—or pure energy? In any event, totally incorporeal. Not life as we know it at all."

"But the planet," Kirk said. "The buildings—this citadel?"

"Probably the planet is real enough. But the rest, conventionalizations, no doubt, just as they said. Useless to them—points of reference for us. I should guess that they are as far above us on the evolutionary scale as we are above the amoeba."

There was a long silence. Finally, Kirk turned toward Kor.

"Well, Commander," he said, "I guess that takes care of the war. Since the Organians aren't going to let us fight, we might as well get started on being friends."

"Yes," Kor said. He thrust out his hand. "Still, in a way, Captain, it's all rather saddening."

"Saddening? Because they're so much more advanced than we are? But it took millions of years. Even the gods didn't spring into being overnight."

"No, that doesn't sadden me," Kor said. "I'm only sorry that they wouldn't let us fight." He sighed. "It would have been glorious."

THE CITY ON THE EDGE OF FOREVER*

(Harlan Ellison)

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* The script for this story differed drastically in some respects from Mr Ellison's original version, which he was kind enough to send to me. In writing this adaptation I tried to preserve what I thought were the best elements of *both* scripts; but it was tricky to manage and it is more than possible that I have wound up owing apologies all around. It was a poetic and brilliant piece to begin with; if it is a botch now, the fault is entirely mine.—J. B.

Two drops of cordrazine can save a man's life. Ten drops of that unpredictable drug will sometimes kill. When a defective hypospray went off in McCoy's hand, a hundred times that amount was pumped into his body in a split second.

With a frenzied, incoherent cry, the ship's surgeon fled the bridge. Within minutes the entire ship was alerted. The library tapes on cordrazine said that at such dosages, paranoia was a frequent outcome—but McCoy knew the ship too well. By the time a search was organized, he had reached the transporter room and beamed himself down to the planet the *Enterprise* was orbiting.

The transporter had been monitoring what appeared to be a curious time disturbance on the surface of the unknown world. The settings had not been changed; whatever was down there, McCoy was now in the heart of it. Kirk would have liked to have had more information about it first, but there was no chance of that now. They had to go after McCoy. Kirk picked Spock, Scott, Uhura, Davis and a Security guard, and, of course, himself.

They materialized in the midst of extensive ancient ruins. Much of it was almost dust, but there were enough scattered sections of broken wall and piled stone to provide hiding places for McCoy.

This planet was *cold*. A burnt-out sun hung dolorously in the sky, producing a permanent, silvery twilight. It was a dead world, an ash. The ruins extended past the horizon—a city of tremendous

size—but there could have been no life in it for ten thousand centuries. It takes a long time for a sun to burn out.

In the midst of the desolation, one object was polished like new, drawing Kirk's eyes instantly. It was a large, octagonal mirror—or was it a mirror? Its framed, cloudy surface was nebulous, shifting. Whatever it was, it gleamed, untarnished, agelessly new. A cube, also untarnished but half-buried in dust and rubble, sat beside it. Spock aimed his tricorder at it.

"Whatever that is," Kirk said crisply, "make it the hub of our search pattern. Fan out."

The group separated quickly—all but Spock, who was drawing closer to the shining object, instead. He said, "Unbelievable!"

"Mr Spock?"

"Sir, this one, single object is the source of all the time displacement we detected out in space. I do not understand where it gets the power, or how it applies it. It cannot be a machine, not in any sense that we understand the term, but?"

Kirk eyed the object. "Then what is it?

At once, the dead air was stirred by a heavy hum; and then a resonant, vibrantly throbbing voice spoke from the object itself.

"*A? question*," the voice said. "A question. Since before your sun burned hot in space, and before your race was born, I have awaited a question."

"What are you?" Kirk said.

"I? am the Guardian of Forever."

"Are you a machine," Kirk said, "or a being?"

"I am both, and neither. I am my own beginning, my own ending."

Spock said, "I see no reason for answers to be couched in riddles."

"I answer all questions as simply as I can."

"What is your function, then?"

"I am a time portal. Through me the great race which once lived here went to another age."

"Past or future?" Spock said.

"The past," the voice said, like a sigh. "Always and only the past. And to their past, which you cannot share. I can only offer you yours. Behold—the birth of the planet you both share."

In the mirror, there was suddenly the image of a solar system forming out of a changing, cooling fireball? and somehow Kirk

knew that it was not an image at all, but a distant view of a fact. A moment later, they were looking at a primeval, shoreless sea; and then, suddenly, a jungle of tree ferns.

"Mr Spock," Kirk said thoughtfully, "if that is a doorway back through time, could we somehow take Bones back a day in time, then relive that accident? Stop that hypo spitting into him?"

"We would have to catch him first," Spock said. "Besides, Captain, look at the speed at which centuries are passing. To step through precisely on the day we wish would appear to be impossible."

"Guardian, can you change the speed at which yesterday passes?"

"I was made to offer the past in this manner," the Guardian said. "I cannot change."

Egypt waxed, waned, passed. Atlantis sank. Skin-clothed barbarians suddenly became Hellenes. Spock was getting it all into the tricorder.

"It's strangely compelling, isn't it?" Kirk said. "To step through there, lose oneself in another world—"

He was interrupted by a shout and a scrambling sound. He spun. McCoy, who evidently had been quite nearby, was headed straight for the time vortex at a dead run. Nobody but Kirk and Spock were anywhere near him.

Spock dropped the tricorder and intercepted, but McCoy, his eyes frighteningly wild, twisted away from him. That left no one but Kirk, who made a flying dive; but McCoy did a little dance step of broken field maneuvering and was free. Kirk landed painfully and rolled over.

"Bones!" he shouted. "No, no!"

But he was in time only to see McCoy disappear into the cloudy octagonal frame, his body popping out of sight as though it had been swallowed. Then the vortex was as blank as it had been when they first saw it.

"*Where is he?*" Kirk demanded.

"He has passed into what was," said the voice of the Guardian.

"Captain," said Uhura, a little breathlessly. She had arrived on the run. "I've lost contact with the ship. I was talking to them, and it suddenly went dead. No static; just? nothing."

"The communicator is all right?"

"Yes, sir. It just seems like there's nothing up there."

The Guardian said, "Your vessel, your beginning, all that you knew is gone."

Kirk felt a fearful sinking of his heart, remembering that episode when he and Spock and an archaic man named John Christopher had fought not to be noticed by the world of the 1970s. He said grayly, "McCoy has somehow changed history."

Scott had joined the party. He said, "This time we're stranded, Captain?"

Kirk did not answer, but Spock nodded. "With no past—no future."

"Captain," Uhura said. "I'm? I'm frightened."

Kirk looked slowly up into the black and star-littered sky of the nameless planet, empty now of the *Enterprise*, without even a sun to give it warmth and joy.

"Earth's not even out there," he said. "Not the one we knew. We are totally alone—without even a history."

"We shall have to remake it," Spock said.

"How, Mr Spock?"

"We will have to go back in time ourselves—attempt to set right whatever it was that the doctor changed. I was recording images at the time he left. By synchronizing just out of phase with that, I believe I can approximate when to jump. Perhaps within a month before he arrived. Or a week if we are lucky."

"Guardian!" Kirk said. "If we are successful?"

"Then you will be returned. It will be as though none of you had gone."

"Just finding McCoy back there," Scott said, "would be a miracle."

Spock said, "There is no alternative."

"Scotty, when you think you've waited long enough—whatever 'long enough' might mean now—then?" Kirk shrugged. "Each of you will have to try it. Even if you fail, you'll be alive in some past world, somewhere."

"Stand ready, Captain," Spock said. "I think the time is coming around again."

They were standing in a seamy, down-at-the-heels city street, with murky glass storefronts and an occasional square four-wheeled vehicle. Over one store was a large sign proclaiming:

and beside it, another store with a sign that said FREE SOUP and a smaller sign with an arrow, reading FORM A LINE. Queues of shabby men in caps and shapeless coats were moving, very slowly, into both stores.

Spock said, bemused, "Is this the heritage my mother's people brag about?"

"This," Kirk said with disgust, "is what it took us five hundred years to crawl up from. Never mind that now—somebody's going to spot us pretty quickly, and our clothes aren't exactly period costumes. Let's do something about that first."

He drew Spock down the alley in which they had first popped into this world. "There's a line of clothes back there."

"I'm afraid I will draw attention either way, Captain."

"Well, Mr Spock," Kirk said, "if we can't disguise you, we'll have to find a way to explain you. Here, put these on." He pulled down from a line two shirts, two pairs of pants, an old jacket and a wool stocking-cap.

"You might see if you can locate me a ring for my nose," Spock said. "But Captain, aside from the fact that this is theft, I do not believe we ought to change clothes out in the open. As I remember your history, old Earth was rather stuffy about such matters."

"That's right. Okay, let's march." Kirk rolled the clothing into a bundle and tucked it under his arm.

They made it back to the open street without incident. Kirk began to feel better. "You know," he said, "I rather like this century. Simpler, easier to manage. Why, I might even find I actually have a considerable talent for? *wump!*"

He had run squarely into the arms of a large, bulkily obvious Security-guard type. The blue-uniformed man looked them up and down, and then at the clothing bundle Kirk was shifting back and forth. At last he said pleasantly, "Well?"

"Uh, yes," Kirk said. "You are a police officer. I seem to remember?"

It seemed to be the wrong tack. Kirk let the sentence trail off and tried a friendly smile. The policeman smiled back, but he did not move. Behind Kirk, Spock said, "You were saying something about a considerable talent, sir?"

This was also a mistake, since it attracted the officer's attention to Spock, and especially to his pointed ears. Kirk said hurriedly,

"My friend is, uh, Chinese, of course. The ears, ah, are actually easily explained. You see?"

The policeman remained absolutely silent. Kirk was stumped.

"Perhaps the unfortunate accident I had in childhood?" Spock prompted.

"In the fields, yes," Kirk said quickly. "Caught his head in a mechanical, uh, rice-picker. Fortunately? an American missionary living nearby, who happened to have been a skilled plastic surgeon in civilian life?"

"Sure an' t' God that's enough, now," the policeman said. "Drop the bundle, hands up against that wall. Phwat a story."

"Yes, sir," Kirk said. As he was about to turn, he stopped and stared at the policeman's shoulder. "Uh, careless of your wife to let you go out that way."

"What?" the policeman said, raising his nightstick.

"Quite untidy, sir," Spock said, picking up the cue. "If you will allow me?"

He pinched the policeman's shoulder gently, and, equally gently, the policeman sagged to the pavement.

"And now, Captain?" he said.

"Yes," Kirk said. "As I recall, the appropriate expression is—flog it!"

Police whistles—an eerie, unfamiliar sound—were shrilling behind them as they ducked into an open cellar door. The cellar was dismal: a coal bin, an old furnace, mountains of litter, a few mildewed trunks, all looking like monsters in the dimness. They changed clothes quickly. Kirk wore the jacket; Spock pulled the stocking cap down over his elegant, dangerous ears.

Spock got out his tricorder. Nothing came out of it but an unpleasant electronic squeal, like an echo of the fading police whistles.

The two men looked at each other over the coal pile. At last Kirk said, "Obviously this is not a game. Time we faced the unpleasant facts. Status, Mr Spock?"

"First," Spock said precisely, "I *believe* we have about a week before Dr McCoy arrives. But as far as being certain of that?"

"And arrives where? New York, Boise, Honolulu, Outer Mongolia?"

"Obviously, I do not know. There is a theory?" Spock hesitated. Then he shrugged and plowed on, "The theory is that time can be regarded as fluid, like a river, with currents, backwash, eddies. Like the solar-system analogies of atomic structure, it is more misleading than enlightening, but there may be a certain truth to it all the same."

"Mr Spock, if I didn't know you better, I'd suspect you were trying to educate me."

"No, sir. I mean only to suggest that the same time current which swept McCoy to a certain place or event has taken us to the same place or event? Unless that is the case, I believe we have no hope."

"Odds?"

"Captain, in time there are no odds; you are pitting an infinite series of instants against an utterly improbable event. And yet?" Spock held up the tricorder. "Locked in here is the *exact* place, the exact moment, even exact images of what McCoy did back here. If I could hook this into the ship's computer for just a few moments?"

"Any chance that you could build a makeshift computer?"

"In this zinc-plated, vacuum-tube culture?" Spock said. "None at all. I have no tools, no parts, no supplies? I do not even know the line voltage."

"I see," Kirk said slowly. "Yes, it would pose a complex problem in logic. Forgive me, Mr Spock. I do sometimes expect too much of you."

Spock's head turned sharply, but at the same time the overhead bulb in the basement went on yellowly and there was the sound of a door opening at the head of the stairs to the ground floor. A young woman's voice called strongly, "Who's there?"

Both men came to their feet as the girl came down the stairs. Despite the obvious savagery of the period, she seemed quite unafraid. She was simply dressed and not very pretty, but her voice was instantly arresting.

"We didn't want to trespass, miss," Kirk said. "But since it was getting cold out there?"

She looked at him with cool appraisal and said, "A lie is a bad way to say 'hello.' Was it really that cold?"

"Well," Kirk said, "no. We were being chased by a police officer."

"Because??"

"Petty theft. These clothes. We had no money."

"I see." She looked both of them over. "It's the same story all over. I need some help. Sweeping up, washing dishes, general cleanup. Are you willing to work?"

"At what scale of payment?" Spock said. Kirk looked at him in astonishment. The first officer added, "I need radio tubes and so forth. Parts, wire? It is? a hobby."

"Fifteen cents an hour for ten hours a day," the girl said. "I'm not exactly wealthy, either. Will it do? Good. Your names?"

"I'm Jim Kirk. His name is Spock."

"I'm Edith Keeler," she said crisply, "and you can start by cleaning up down here."

She smiled pleasantly and went back up the stairs, leaving Kirk a little startled by her brisk, no-nonsense attitude and her utter fearlessness. At last he looked around, found a pair of brooms, and tossed one to Spock.

"Radio tubes and so on, eh?" he said. "Well, Mr Spock, I approve. I think everyone should have a hobby. It keeps them off the streets."

The mission was a mixture of things which Kirk only vaguely recognized: part church, part dining room, part recreation area. It was furnished with tables and low benches, and there was a low dais at the front where workers dispensed soup and coffee. To one side, was a large tool box, fastened with an ungainly padlock with a dial on its face. Shabbily dressed men sat to either side of Kirk and Spock, waiting without enthusiasm. The nearest, a small man with thin features who looked remarkably like some sort of rodent, eyed the two of them.

"You'll be sorry," he said, with exaggerated boredom.

"Why?" Kirk said.

"You expect to eat free or something? Now you gotta listen to Miss Goodie Twoshoes."

"Good evening," Edith's voice said, on cue. She was already striding toward the dais; now she mounted it. The meagerness of the audience did not seem to discourage her. She was both casual and cheerful. "Now, as I'm sure at least someone out there has said, you've got to pay for the soup."

There was some laughter. "Not that she's a bad-lookin' broad," the rodent said, *sotto voce*. "But if she really wanted to give a guy somethin'?"

"Shut up," Kirk said. Then, noticing Spock's eye on him, he added, "I'd like to hear this."

"Of course," Spock said, noncommittally.

"Let's start as we always do—by getting something straight," Edith said. "Why do I work, connive, and maybe even cheat a little in order to keep feeding you? I don't know. It's something that I do. But I've got no patience with parasites. If you can't break off with booze, or you've gotten out of the habit of work, or you *like* being a bad risk, I don't want you and you're not welcome to the soup."

Kirk listened with astonishment. He did not know what he had expected, but surely not this.

"Of course," she went on, "I know that every day is a fight to survive. That's all you have time for. But I've no use for a man who uses free soup as an excuse to give up fighting. To survive at all, you need more than soup. You need to know that your life is worth living, no matter what.

"Shadow and reality, my friends. That's the secret of getting through these bad times. Know what is, and what only seems to be. Hunger is real, and so is cold. But sadness is not.

"And it is the sadness that will ruin you—that will kill you. Sadness and hate. We all go to bed a little hungry every night, but it is possible to find peace in sleep, knowing you have lived another day, and hurt no one doing it."

"Bonner the Stochastic," Spock whispered.

"He won't be born for more than two hundred years. Listen."

"It's difficult not to hate a world that treats us all like this," Edith was saying. "I know that. Difficult, but not impossible. Somebody once said that hate is only the absence of love, but that's not a message that a man can absorb on an empty stomach. But there's something else that's true: Love is only the absence of hate. Empty the hatred from your hearts and you are ready for love. If you can go to bed tonight free of hatred, you have already won a major victory.

"And that's all of my sermon for today. Eat hearty, mates."

She stepped down and left the big, gloomy room.

"Most interesting," Spock said. "An uncommon insight."

"An uncommon woman," Kirk replied quietly; but Edith Keeler, coming up behind them, evidently overheard him.

"You two are uncommon workmen, Mr Kirk," she said. "The basement looked like it had been scrubbed and polished."

Kirk thought about his days as a midshipman and at last saw some use for holystoning; but he said only, "Then we report back for more work?"

"At seven a.m. Do you have a flop for the night?"

"A what?"

Edith studied him curiously. "You're really new at this, aren't you? A 'flop' is a place to sleep. There's a vacant room where I live, two dollars a week. If you want it, I'll guide you there when we're through with these dishes."

"Indeed we do," Kirk said. "Thank you."

Like everything else, they had yet seen in this culture, the room was plain and depressing: a few pieces of scarred furniture, a sagging bed, limp and sooty curtains. Now, however, some of it was masked by the Medusa-head of wires, coils and banks of old vacuum tubes which Spock was attaching to his tricorder. As Kirk came in with a small paper sack of groceries, plus another small package of hardware, Spock said abstractedly, "Captain, I must have some sponge platinum, about a kilogram. Or a block of the pure metal, perhaps ten grams, would be even better."

Kirk shook his head. "I bring assorted vegetables for you, bologna and a hard roll for me. The other bag, I assure you, contains neither platinum, gold nor diamonds; nor is it likely to in the future. It has just a few second-hand pieces of equipment, and those took the other nine-tenths of our combined earnings for three days to fill your order for them."

"Captain, you're asking me to work with equipment which is hardly better than stone knives and bearskins."

"We have no choice," Kirk said. "McCoy may be here any day now. We've no guarantee that there's some current in time pulling us all together. This has to work—with or without platinum."

"Captain," Spock said glacially, "in three weeks at this, rate, perhaps a month, I might complete the first mnemonic circuits?"

There was a knock, and then Edith poked her head through the door.

"If you can go out now," she said, "I can get you both five hours' work at twenty-two cents an hour. What on earth is *that?*"

"I am endeavoring, Ma'am," Spock said with dignity, "to construct a mnemonic circuit out of stone knives and bearskins."

"I don't know what that means," she said, "but if you want the work you'd better hurry." She withdrew.

"She's right. Let's go, Mr Spock."

"Yes, Captain, in just a moment? It seems to me that I saw some tools for finely detailed work in the mission."

"Yes, the man who was working on the, uh, cuckoo-clock was using them. That girl has more things going on around there than a TKL computer. Clock repair project, woodworking, the tailor shop in the back?"

"You were quite right, Captain," Spock said. "She is a fascinating study. Well, I am ready now. I doubt that twenty-two cents an hour will advance me far, but those tools?"

"Just be sure you return them."

"Believe me, Captain," the Science Officer said, "my first taste of petty theft was also my last"

The auxiliary rig to the tricorder now nearly filled the room. It looked like a robot squid constructed by a small child, but it clicked, whirred and hummed purposefully. Clearly, Spock did not like the noise—he was used to machines that made as little fuss as possible—but he wasted no time trying to eliminate it. He straightened abruptly.

"Captain, I may have stumbled onto something."

Kirk sniffed. "You've got a connection burning somewhere, too."

"I am loading these lines too heavily. But this may be a focal point in time. Watch the tricorder screen. I have slowed the recording it made from the time vortex."

Kirk peered at the small tricorder screen. It showed Edith Keeler's face; then the image sharpened, and he realized that it was a newspaper photo. The paper was dated February 23, 1936—six years from "now." Over the photo was a headline: FDr CONFERS WITH SLUM AREA 'ANGEL'. The caption read, *The President and Edith Keeler today conferred for more than an hour on her proposal to?*

There was a mean snap of sparks, a curl of smoke and the image collapsed. "Quick!" Kirk said. "Can you get it back?"

"Even if I could, it would not help us," Spock said. "Something was wrong even before the short circuit. On the same memory trace, I saw a *1930* newspaper article."

"What of it? Either way, we know her future, Spock. Within six years from now, she's going to become important, nationally recognized?"

"No, sir," Spock said quietly. After a pause, he began again. "No, Captain. What I saw was Edith Keeler's obituary. She never became famous. She will die this year in some kind of accident."

"You're mistaken! They can't both be true!"

"I'm afraid they can, Captain," Spock said. "She has two possible futures—depending upon what McCoy does."

"What?? Oh, I see. McCoy has something to do with her living or dying. And in his present state?" The shock of the notion halted Kirk for an instant, but he forced himself to go on. "Mr Spock, did McCoy kill her? Is *that* how all of history was changed?"

"I cannot tell, Captain. Something still worse is possible."

"What, man?"

"That he might have changed history by *preventing* her from being killed."

"Get this thing fixed! We've got to find the answer before McCoy gets here!"

"And what then, Captain?" Spock said. "Suppose we find that to set things right, Edith Keeler must die? That to restore our future, we must prevent McCoy from saving her? What then?"

"I don't know," Kirk said fiercely. "But we've got to find out. Did you get the jewelers' tools all right? That box was closed with a combination lock."

"Not a proper lock, sir. A childish device in probability?"

"? and he opened it like a real pro," Edith's voice said behind them. Both men spun. She spared the jury-rigged apparatus only one glance, and then turned back to Spock. "Question: Why? I want to hear only one answer. Please make it the honest one."

Spock pointed to the rig. "You have seen, this work going on before," he said. "I needed delicate tools. They would have been returned in the morning."

Edith eyed him. Perhaps his alien appearance gave her less than full confidence; or perhaps the very temper of the times was against him. She said, "Gadgetry doesn't impress me. Theft does. Out you go."

"Miss Keeler," Kirk said, "if Mr Spock said they were important to have, and that you'd get them back in the morning, you may depend upon his word."

"I'll accept that," she said slowly, "on certain conditions. Chiefly, that Mr Kirk answer my questions. And you needn't look so innocent, either. You know as well as I how out of place you both are here."

"Interesting," Spock said. "Where would you say we do belong, Miss Keeler?"

"You, Mr Spock?" She nodded toward Kirk. "At his side. As if you've always been there, always will be. But where *he* belongs? well, I'll work it out eventually."

"I see," Spock said. "Well, I'll go on with this?"

"I'll go on with this—Captain," Edith Keeler said, smiling at Kirk. "Even when he doesn't say it, he does."

She led the way out. In the hall, she said, "By the way, why *does* he call you Captain? Were you in the war together?"

"We? served together."

"It shows. And you don't want to talk about it. Why? Is it something you think you've done wrong? Are you afraid of something? Whatever it is, let me help."

Kirk took her by the arms, and for a moment came very close to kissing her. He did not; but he did not release her, either.

" 'Let me help,' " he said. "A hundred years or so from now, I think it was, a famous novelist will write a classic using that theme. He recommends those three words even over 'I love you.' "

"Your tenses are rather mixed," she said. "A hundred years from now? And where was he? Or, where will he be from?"

"A silly question, a silly answer," Kirk said roughly. He pointed at the ceiling. "From about there. A planet circling that far left star in Orion's belt."

She looked up involuntarily; and this time, he did kiss her. He was not a little surprised to find it returned.

Spock turned as Kirk came back into the room. He asked no questions, but it was clear that he would welcome some answers.

"All she said was, 'Let me help you,' " Kirk said painfully. "She's something of a saint, Mr Spock."

"She may be martyred," Spock said. "To history. Look here."

He switched on his apparatus. "This is how history went after McCoy changed it. I picked up the thread just after you went out. See: in the late 1930's a growing pacifist movement, called World Peaceways. Its influence on the government delayed the United States' entry into the Second World War. Apparently very few people knew that World Peaceways was German-controlled. While peace negotiations dragged on, Germany had time to complete its heavy water experiments."

"Hitler and Nazism won the war?"

"Yes. Because this lets them develop the fission bomb first. Let me rerun it, Captain. You will see that there is no mistake. And Edith Keeler was the guiding spirit of the peace movement."

"But," Kirk said, "she was *right*. Clearly, peace would have been?"

"She was right," Spock said, "but at the wrong moment. With the atomic bomb, and their primitive rockets to carry it, the Nazis captured the world, Captain. And after that, barbarism. The Nazi yoke was so heavy that the world tore itself apart trying to throw it off. Spaceflight never did develop."

"*No*," said Kirk, softly, in pain.

"And all that," Spock said implacably, "because McCoy came back and somehow kept her from dying as she should have, in a street accident. We have to stop him,"

"Exactly how did she die? What day?"

"I can't be that precise," Spock said. "I am sorry, Captain."

"Mister Spock," Kirk said slowly, "I believe I am in love with Edith Keeler."

"I know," Spock said, very quietly indeed. "That is why I said, 'I'm sorry.' "

"And if I don't stop McCoy??"

"Then, you save her. And millions will die who did not die in what would have been our history."

"Abstract millions," Kirk said. "A different history. But Edith Keeler is here. She's real. She deserves to live."

"And so do Scott, Uhura, the others we left behind—or ahead. Sir, you are their Captain. They are waiting for you, in the ruined city on the edge of Forever. They, and the future that nurtured you. The choice is yours."

It had to be faced; but he could not face it—not yet. There would be time to decide when the crisis came. Of course.

In the meantime, there was still Edith? still. Spock said no more about the matter. He was with the two of them sometimes, somehow silently supportive. At others, guided perhaps by his peculiar form of semitelepathy, he vanished at just the appropriate moment.

This time, they emerged together from the mission, but separated almost at once. Spock started away from the twilight street, while Edith and Kirk crossed to the opposite sidewalk. Edith seemed even happier than usual.

"If we hurry," she said, "we can catch that Clark Gable movie at the Orpheum. I'd really love to see it, Jim."

Kirk smiled. "A what kind of movie?"

"That's funny," she said, looking up as if startled. "Dr McCoy said almost the same?"

Kirk stopped dead in his tracks and whirled to face her, his heart suddenly racing.

"*McCoy?*" He took her by the shoulders, his fingers tightening until she winced. "*Leonard* McCoy? Edith, this is important."

"Why, yes. He's in the mission, in a little room upstairs. He's been very sick, almost raving, but I think he's nearly?"

"Spock!" Kirk shouted. "Edith—wait here for me."

He ran across the street, waving at the first officer. Spock turned back, his whole face a question; but he did not need to ask it. As the two men met in front of the mission door, McCoy came out of it.

The surgeon stopped dead in surprise, and then a grin split his face. There was a great deal of hand shaking and back thumping, with all three of them talking at once.

"Bones, where have you?"

"How'd you find me? And for that matter, where *are* we?"

"When Edith said 'Dr McCoy' I?"

"Remarkable that you should have been that close to us?"

"I seem to have been sick for a long time?"

Kirk looked quickly back toward Edith. Her expression was mostly one of intense curiosity; but she also looked as though she felt a little left out of it all. As she saw him turn to her, she stepped out into the street.

She did not see the moving van lumbering down on her. *This was the time*. Without a moment's thought, Kirk ran toward her.

"Captain!" Spock's voice shouted. "*No!*"

Kirk froze, his body a solid mass of anguish. At the same time, McCoy's mouth opened in a wordless yell and he lunged for the curb. With a terrible flash of self-hatred, Kirk, knowing what *must* come next, threw himself in McCoy's way, blindly, almost sobbing.

McCoy stumbled. Edith cried out, and then there was the screaming shriek of brakes.

Then, silence.

"Jim," McCoy said raggedly. "You deliberately stopped me? Did you hear me? Do you know what you just did?"

Kirk could not reply. Spock took his arm gently. "He knows," he said. "Soon you will know, too. And what *was*? now *is* again."

Kirk sat at his desk in the *Enterprise*, back in uniform, staring at nothing. Behind him, Spock's voice said: "Coordinates from the bridge, Captain."

The words meant nothing. The papers before him meant nothing. It was as though he were all but dead.

"Jim," Spock said.

The deadness did not lift, but a small thread of startlement crept through it. Kirk turned slowly.

"Mr Spock," he said. "That's the first time you've ever called me anything but Captain."

"I had to reach you," Spock said gently. "But never mind the coordinates. Jim, on my world, the nights are very long. In the morning, there is the sound of silver birds against the sky. My people know there is always time enough for everything. You'll come with me for a rest. You'll feel comfortable there."

"All the time in the world?"

"And filled with tomorrows."

Suddenly, the bitterness welled up. "Not for her," Kirk said. "For us, but not for her. She was negligible."

"No, Captain, she was not. Her death saved uncountable billions of people. Both the living and the yet unborn. Far from negligible."

"And I failed her," Kirk said, groping for understanding. "I didn't save her. And I loved her."

"No. You acted," Spock said. "No woman was ever loved as much, Jim. Because no other woman was almost offered the universe for love."

OPERATION—ANNIHILATE!

(Steven W. Carabatsos)

The spread of the insanity was slow, and apparently patternless, but it was also quite inexorable. The first modern instance in the record was Aldebaran Magnus Five. Then, Cygni Theta 12. Most recently, Ingraham B—recently enough so that the *Enterprise* had been able to get there within a year of the disaster.

Nothing had been learned from the mission. There were no apparent connections among the three planets—except that on each one, the colonists had gone totally, irrevocably mad, all at the same time, and had killed each other. It hadn't been warfare; the people had simply fallen upon each other in the streets, in their homes, everywhere, until there were none left.

It was Spock who had suggested that there would nevertheless be a pattern, if one assumed that the long-dead civilizations of the Orion complex had fallen to the same cause. The archeological evidence was ambiguous, and besides, the peoples of the cluster had not been human. There was no *a priori* reason why they should have been subject to the afflictions of human beings.

Nevertheless, given the assumption, the computer was able to plot a definite localization and rate of spread—like an amoeboid blotch upon the stars, thrusting out a pseudopod to another world at gradually shortening intervals. If the radioactive dating of the deaths of the Orion civilizations was correct, as it almost surely was—and if the assumption was correct, which was sheer speculation—then the madness had taken two hundred years to appear on its second victim-world, less than a century to crop up a third time, and the next outbreak was due with—in the next month.

"On Deneva, I would say," Spock added. "An Earth-type planet, colonized about a century ago. Pleasant climate, no hazardous life-forms. Of course, I could well be completely wrong about this, since my basic premise is completely *ad hoc*."

"Never mind the logical holes," Kirk said. "Mr Sulu, lay in a course for Deneva. Warp factor four. Lieutenant Uhura, tell

Starship Command where we're going and why. When we break into the Denevan system, raise the planet."

But there was no time for that. The first thing the sensors showed when the *Enterprise* emerged in that system was a Denevan ship apparently on its way toward throwing itself into the Denevan sun.

"Status!" Kirk said tensely.

"He's got a huge jump on us, Captain," Sulu said. "A one-man vessel—sublight velocity but under heavy acceleration."

"Contact, Captain," Uhura said.

"Denevan ship, this is the USS *Enterprise*! Break your heading! You're on a collision course with your sun! Fire your retros!"

From the speaker came a faint and agonized voice. "Help me? please? help me?"

"We're trying to! Spock, can we reach him with a tractor beam?"

"No, sir," Spock said. "Too much solar magnetism."

"Sulu, intercept. Denevan, pull back! Fire your retros!"

"Help me, please? take it out? take it out? please?"

"Skin temperature four hundred degrees," Spock said. "Rising fast."

"He's too close, Captain," Sulu said. "He'll burn—and so will we if we keep this up."

"Keep closing."

"Skin temperature now eight hundred degrees," Spock said.

Suddenly the Denevan's voice came through again, much stronger, and much changed. It seemed almost jubilant. "I did it! It's gone! I'm free. I'm free! I won—oh great God, the sun, *the sun*?"

The words ended in a terrible scream.

"He's gone, Captain," Sulu reported.

"Vector!" Kirk shouted. Then, as the great ship shuddered into its emergency turn, he stared blindly at the now-silent speaker.

"What did he do that for?" he said. "Even if his instruments weren't working, we warned him."

"Obviously suicide," Spock said.

"But why? And Spock, I don't think he wanted to die. You heard him. He asked us to help him."

"Suicides are not rational," Spock said. "By definition."

"Mr Spock, that may be perfectly good logic, but I'm afraid it doesn't satisfy me. And I hate puzzles. They don't look good on the log."

"Captain," Uhura said. "I've gotten through to Deneva itself."

"Good, let's hear it. Hello, Deneva, USS *Enterprise* calling."

"*Enterprise*, please hurry!" a strong voice cried promptly. There was a blast of static. "Help us! I don't have much time! They'll know!"

"Another madman?" Kirk said to nobody in particular. "Lieutenant, can't you clean up some of that static?"

"It's solar static, sir. Should clear gradually as we pull away."

"Hello, Deneva, *Enterprise* here. Please repeat."

"Hurry! Hurry! They'll know in a minute! We need help!"

There was more static. Kirk said: "We're on our way, Deneva. What's wrong? Please explain."

But there was no answer, only still more static. Uhura turned in her chair. "Contact broken, Captain. I'm trying to reestablish, but I think they've switched out."

"All right, Sulu. Course for Deneva—on the double."

The landing party—Kirk, Spock, McCoy, two security guards, and Yeoman Zahara—materialized in an empty city street. There were supposed to be more than a million colonists and their descendants on this planet, nearly a hundred thousand in this city alone; yet the place looked deserted.

"Where is everybody?" Kirk said.

Spock scanned in a circle with his tricorder. "They are here. But they are all indoors. Apparently just sitting there. There is a signal center in that building across the street. It is inoperative, but the power is up."

"All right, let's?"

"Party approaching," Spock interrupted. "Four people—make it five. Coming fast."

He had hardly spoken when five men came around the corner at top speed. They seemed to be ordinary civilians, but Kirk had the instant impression that their faces were warped with agony. All carried clubs. The instant they saw the group from the *Enterprise*,

they burst into a bestial shrieking. It was impossible to tell which of them was screaming what.

"Run! Get away! We don't want to hurt you! Go back! Look out!"

"Fire to stun!" Kirk shouted. The Denevans charged, swinging their clubs.

"Go away! Please! They'll get you! No! Get away from here! We'll have to kill you?"

Kirk fired, followed by the others. The charging Denevans fell in a clatter of clubs. Kirk approached them cautiously. Despite the fact that they had just taken the heavy stun force of a phaser blast at close range, they seemed to be twitching slightly.

"Could you make out all that shouting, Mr Spock?"

"Indeed. They seemed greatly concerned for our safety—so concerned that they wanted to brain, us. This may not be *the* insanity, but?"

"But it'll do for now," Kirk said. "Bones, check them over."

McCoy checked the unconscious bodies quickly, then rose, shaking his head puzzledly. "Something decidedly odd," he said. "These people should be pretty close to being vegetables for the next few hours. But I'm getting high readings, as though their nervous systems were being violently stimulated even while they're?"

He was interrupted by a woman's scream. Kirk whirled. "Fan out!" he said. "That came from that signal center. Come on!"

The scream came again. Inside the building there was a dark lobby of some sort, and a closed door, which turned out to be locked. Kirk lunged against it.

"Open up!" he shouted. "We're from the *Enterprise*."

"They're here!" the woman screamed. "They're here! Keep them away!" Over her voice there was a heavy buzzing sound, which seemed to be rising in pitch.

Kirk and the two guards hit the door together. It burst inward. Here was the signal center, all right, but it looked shoddy, unused. An elderly man lay unconscious on the floor; across the room, a girl was desperately holding a panel of some sort over a ventilation outlet, fighting with all her strength. As the party broke in she staggered backward, dropping the panel, covering her face with her hands and sobbing wildly.

Kirk pointed to the old man while he took the girl in his arms. "It's all right. You're safe."

She screamed again and began to struggle.

"Bones, a hypo! I can't hold her."

McCoy already had his sprayjet out, and a moment later the girl too had collapsed. "The man's alive," he reported. "Some sort of seizure, or maybe just exhaustion. I'd better get them both up to the ship."

"Right. Mr Spock, you heard her. She called out that *they* were here. Your guess?"

"Notice, Captain," Spock said. "Rags stuffed under the door. Pieces of board jammed across the windows. As if they were in a state of siege."

"But by what? There are no harmful life-forms on this planet. And our sensors didn't pick up anything that didn't belong here."

"I am baffled, Captain."

"Bones, beam up with those two people and bring them around. I'm going to have to ask some questions. Mr Spock, we'll go outside and resume looking around. Zahara, are you recording all of this?"

"Of course, Captain."

As they emerged from the communications center, Kirk saw one of the security men standing near a sheltered, shadowy alleyway. He moved toward the party as it appeared.

"Anything, Abrams?"

"Yes sir, but don't ask me what. Something moving back in there. Making a buzzing sound."

Kirk looked around, and then up. All the windows above him seemed to be empty, but in one there was the face of a man. His expression was a terrible combination of agony, fear and desperate hope.

"You!" Kirk shouted at him. "I want to talk to you!"

The face contorted and vanished. Kirk grunted with annoyance. "All right, Spock, Abrams, let's go see what's back in there."

Phasers ready, they moved cautiously into the darkened alley. Almost at once the buzzing noise got louder, and something about the size of a football flew through the air over their heads. Then another.

"Phasers on kill!" Kirk shouted. But for a moment there were no more. Then suddenly Spock pointed. Another such object clung to a wall. Kirk fired.

The beam hit the thing squarely. But it refused to vanish. It simply clung to the wall for a long moment, even under the full force of the beam, and finally slipped off and fell to the earth.

They closed in warily, but there seemed to be no more of the creatures back here. Spock took tricorder readings on the downed object, which seemed to be no more than a gelatinous mass, amorphous, colorless, as though somebody had dumped a jellyfish out of a bucket. Kirk stared at it incredulously.

"What is that?"

"It isn't anything," Spock said promptly. "Not only should it have been destroyed by the phaser blast, but it does not register on the tricorder."

"It's real enough all the same," Kirk said. "And it acted alive. Can we take it along, Spock?"

"I advise against it. We have no proper equipment, and it may well be toxic, corrosive—there are a dozen possibilities."

"Whatever they are, they seem to like these shadows," Kirk said. "Let's get out back into the light. We know where we can find them if we want them, anyhow."

As they retreated, the buzzing noise began again. The next instant, one of the objects shot past Kirk and hit Spock squarely in the back, knocking him off his feet. The thing clung to him. His hands tore uselessly at his back. Then, somehow, it was gone, and Spock was lying face down in the alley.

Kirk knelt beside him. "Spock! Are you all right? The thing's gone. Can you stand?"

Spock's hands were still clutching his back. As Kirk spoke, he rolled over, his entire face working with the effort to control himself. He got slowly to his knees. Then his mouth opened, and pitching forward, he began to scream.

Spock was in sick bay under heavy sedation; thus far, McCoy had been unable to think of anything else to do for him. In the interim, however, he had managed to revive the elderly man and the girl the landing party had found in the signal room on Deneva. The girl's name was Aurelan, the man's Menen. They did their best to answer Kirk's questions, but he found their answers difficult to comprehend.

"I know it must sound insane, Captain," Aurelan said, "but it's quite true."

Kirk shot a look at Zahara, who was recording. "You mean these things, whatever they are, have taken over the entire planet?"

"Except for ourselves," Menen said.

"There are over a million inhabitants of Deneva."

"There are millions of *them*," Menen said.

"When did they get to Deneva? How?"

"About four months ago," Menen said with some difficulty, "in a spaceship. We don't know any more than that. They didn't give us the time."

"It's a nightmare, Captain," Aurelan said. "Worse than a nightmare."

"The things don't communicate with you?"

"Oh, they communicate all right," Aurelan said bitterly. "Through pain. Once they attack you, something happens inside. We're not doctors, we don't know the details. But life is agony from then on."

Menen added, "My son told me—before he died—that they need bodies the way we need tools. Arms and legs—human beings. And once they take over, they can't be resisted. The people who tried to kill you in the street didn't want to hurt you. They wanted your help. But the things ordered them to attack you, and they had no choice."

"But why didn't they take you two over too?"

"We think they spared us so that we could maintain normal contacts with other planets and ships. They want ships, Captain. They need them. They're forcing our people to build ships right now."

"My brother, Noban?" Aurelan began.

"He's the man who flew his ship into the sun?"

Aurelan nodded sadly. "The creatures had him. He almost went mad from the pain. But he told us that Deneva is just a way-station for them. They mean to spread out. You see?" She paused and swallowed. "Their hosts become useless after a while. They go mad. And then the things need new hosts. More people. Planet after planet. They come, and they leave madness, and they go to the next?"

"In the name of God, Captain," Menen said, "you've got to do something!"

"I'll do what I can," Kirk said. "What about my first officer, Mr Spock?"

"Is he important to your ship?" Aurelan said.

"Extremely," Kirk said. "And to me personally. He's one of my closest friends."

"In that case," Menen said, "kill him."

"What!"

"Kill him. Now. Quickly. Because only endless agony lies ahead for him, agony that will end in madness. If you are his friend, be merciful."

"Security calling Captain Kirk," said the bridge speaker.

"Kirk here."

"Captain, this is Ames. Mr Spock has attacked his nurse and fled. He seems deranged."

"All decks security alert. He may be dangerous. Aurelan, Menen, you'd better get to your quarters and stay there."

They went quietly. Only seconds later, it seemed, the elevator door opened again and Spock charged out.

"Get away from the controls!" he screamed. "I have to take her down!"

Before anyone could move, he bad reached the helm and had knocked Sulu down and away with one sweeping blow. The navigator and Scott leapt on him, but Spock was a powerful man; he sent them reeling.

"Security to the bridge!" Uhura was calling into her mike. "Alert! General alert to the bridge!"

Kirk joined in the melee, but they were all handicapped by the desire not to hurt Spock; the first officer had no such compunctions. They only barely managed to keep him away from the controls.

Then three security men appeared, and in a few moments Spock was held fast. "I have to take the ship down!" he panted. "I don't want to! Help me! Help me!"

Somehow McCoy was on the scene now, and elbowing his way through the crowd, he gave the first officer a shot. Spock collapsed at once.

"Get him back to sick bay," Kirk said, "and this time, strap him down."

The security men carried him out, with Kirk and McCoy following. It was a grim procession.

"Well, Menen warned me," Kirk said. "He told me that if Spock meant anything to me, I should kill him."

"Now *there's* a tomfool notion."

"Don't worry, Bones, the idea doesn't appeal to me either. But we've got to do something to help him."

"Well, I've at least gotten a start on it," McCoy said. "Come on in and I'll show you."

In McCoy's office, the surgeon showed Kirk a jar full of transparent liquid. In the fluid, a long, almost-transparent tendril drifted and twisted.

"It's a piece of living tissue of some sort," McCoy said. "Call it a tentacle. I took it out of Spock's spinal column an hour ago."

"Is that what causes the pain?"

McCoy nodded. "His entire nervous system has been infiltrated by this stuff. And far too thoroughly for conventional surgery to remove. I don't know how to get it out."

"Then if the old man is right," Kirk said, "this tissue is responsive to directives sent out by the other creatures."

"Or is it *the* creature?"

"Explain."

"By itself," McCoy said, "this stuff is just undifferentiated tissue. No organs. And I'd guess the same for the individual creatures we saw on the surface. They didn't look like things, but *parts* of things. Put them all together and—well, I'm sure they wouldn't spell 'Mother.' But that's about all I'm sure of."

"Do you know why it resists a phaser blast?"

"It's mostly energy itself—nonprotoplasmic. That's why it can fly too. A phaser blast affects it about like a stream from a fire hose would us: knocks it down, stuns it, but that's all. Now let's go look at Spock and I'll show you something else."

Spock was lying strapped down and under sedation, under the diagnostic panel.

"Watch the left indicator," McCoy said. "It's a dolorimeter—registers the level of pain. Right now it's preset at the maximum tolerance level. But if I open a channel to Spock?"

He moved a knob. At once, the indicator rose nearly to the top of the scale and froze there.

"That's what he's going through," McCoy said softly. "It's as though he were being consumed by fire, from the inside out. No wonder the poor devils go mad."

"And no wonder," Kirk said, "that they come to think killing each other is an act of mercy."

As he spoke, the indicator began to drop, very slowly. McCoy stared at it. "What the?"

Spock opened his eyes. "Hello, Doctor," he said weakly. "Hello, Captain."

"Mr Spock! How do you feel?"

"Unwell. But these restraints will no longer be necessary. Nor will your sedations, Doctor. I will be able to return to duty."

"That's impossible," McCoy said.

"Spock, we've just seen what that pain can do to you," Kirk added.

"I regret my behavior," Spock said. "The pain greatly slowed my thinking. I did not even remember that we cannot set the ship down, on any planet. But I can control the pain now."

"How?" McCoy demanded.

"I am a Vulcan; we are trained to use our minds. Pain is only another kind of sensory input, which a trained mind ought to be able to handle."

"You're only half Vulcan," Kirk said. "What about the human half"?"

"It is an inconvenience, but it is manageable. The creature—all of its thousands of parts—is pressing upon me even now. It wants this ship. But I can resist. It is not especially pleasant, but I assure you there will be no danger if you release me."

"The strongest mind in the world has to relax after a while," McCoy said. "If I put you on mild sedation.. "

"No drugs, Doctor. My mind must be clear."

"Mr Spock, I need you," Kirk said. "But I can't take any chances. You stay here. Sweat it out for a while. If you can maintain control, then come back. Until then, do what the doctor says. That's an order."

Spock nodded. Then his face twitched and the dolorimeter shot up again. Closing his eyes, Spock whispered: "The mind rules. There is no pain. There? is? no? pain?"

On the bridge, Uhura had a call waiting from Starfleet.

"*Enterprise* standing by, Commodore Anhalt," Kirk said.

"We've studied your reports of the situation on Geneva, Captain," Anhalt said. "We agree that the creatures, whatever they are, pose a clear and immediate threat to the area. It is our conclusion that, left alone, they would spread rapidly throughout that quadrant and perhaps farther. Can you tell us anything of the nature of the creatures?"

"Not yet. We're preparing to capture a specimen for analysis."

"Fine. But you are not on a specimen-collecting expedition, Captain. Regardless of the nature of the creatures, they must be destroyed—whatever the cost."

"Commodore," Kirk said, "there are more than a million innocent people on that planet. I may not be able to destroy the creatures without?"

"We are aware of that, Captain," Anhalt said evenly. "Your orders stand. We will expect your progress reports. Starfleet out."

The image faded. Kirk turned away from the screen to discover his first officer standing behind him.

"Spock, I gave you a direct order to stay in bed!"

"Until I was satisfied that I could maintain control," Spock said. "I am satisfied. So is Dr McCoy."

"You're certain?"

"Absolutely."

"All right, then put your mind to work on this: How do I capture one of those creatures? They don't respond to the transporter any better than they do to phaser fire—and I'm not about to beam a man down there. I'd just beam back another casualty."

"Not necessarily," Spock said. "If the man's nervous system were already inhabited, there would be little or nothing further the creatures could do to him."

Kirk stared at him. "I see what you're getting at," he said, "and I don't like it."

"Captain, in the same circumstances, I do not think you would hesitate for a moment. I simply claim the right to do as you would do, if our positions were reversed. I am the logical man for the job."

After a long silence, Kirk said: "It is so ordered. Be careful, and stay in constant touch with us."

"Of course, Captain."

Spock came back with two specimens—one of the creatures and a raving man. "I thought we would need somebody else who was already infected too," he said. "After all, the main problem is how to get the creature out of the body."

Aurelan reacted with shock and despair. "That is Kartan," she said. "We were to be married, before the creatures came."

She would not stay to watch McCoy testing, and Kirk could hardly blame her.

"It's the same picture, only more advanced," McCoy said. "In effect, he hardly has a nervous system of his own any more. The tissue has taken it over."

"It seems that at least we did find out what happened on Ingraham B and the other planets," Kirk said.

"No doubt about it. But what do we *do?*"

Spock came in, carrying the transparent case with the creature in it.

"Here it is," he said. "At first glance, a unicellular creature of sorts—but actually part of a creature. Its own level of activity is so low it doesn't even affect instruments. Its tremendous power is the result of participation in the whole. What it resembles more than anything else is a huge individual brain cell."

"How do you know?" McCoy said.

"You forget, Doctor, the creature has infiltrated my own system. I am in constant contact with it. I find it most annoying."

"I don't doubt that," Kirk said. "But how do we destroy it?"

"I think we have a clue. You will recall Noban, the Denevan who flew into his sun. Just before his death, he cried out that he was free—that he had won. Apparently the proximity to the sun destroyed the creature controlling him."

"We already know they don't like light," Kirk said slowly. "But how do we expose them to light of that intensity? And what good would it do anyhow? A million of the creatures are inside human bodies."

"One was inside Noban's," Spock pointed out. "*Something* drove it out. But we need take no chances. The *Enterprise* has the capacity to turn Deneva into a miniature sun—a ball of nuclear energy. They would not survive that."

"Surely not," Kirk said thoughtfully.

"Now hold on," McCoy said. "Are you seriously considering this? Destroying a million people whose only crime was being victimized by these filthy things?"

"Our mission," Spock said somberly, "is to destroy the aliens—at whatever cost."

"Not at that cost! Jim, this idea is insane."

"These creatures are trying to spread out in the galaxy," Kirk said. "And the Denevans are already building ships for them. Aside

from the fact that I have been given an order, we do not have much time."

"I have an alternative," Spock said.

"Great God, man," McCoy said, "spit it out!"

"Clearly any radiation intense enough to destroy the creatures would also destroy the people. But I think the hint we took from the fact that the creatures like shadows is a false lead. Light is a medium to them, like water is to a fish; they may simply prefer certain frequencies or levels, as some fish prefer saltwater to fresh. But consider this: If you have a free energy flow that for some reason you cannot conduct through a wire, a wave-guide or anything else of that sort, how do you direct it? Or, if you wish, disrupt it? The agency must be something that is both common and intense near a sun, yet completely harmless to human beings; remember, Noban's parasite was destroyed *before* he was."

"I'm no physicist," McCoy said. "Is there such an agency, or are we just playing games?"

"Certainly there is," Kirk exclaimed. "Magnetism!"

"That is what I had in mind," Spock said. "Of course, we cannot generate a magnetic field as intense as a sun's, but it may not be necessary." He paused as Aurelan and Menen came in, explained his idea again quickly, and went on: "We have your son to thank for this, Menen. But what particularly interests me is that his parasite was not forced out gradually by the gradually increasing intensity of the general magnetic field. Instead, insofar as we can tell, it was wrenched out quite suddenly. This leads me to suspect that motion is the key—that what happened was that his ship passed through the rapidly whirling magnetic field of a sunspot. *That* is an effect we can duplicate. If I am right, it will pull the creature out like pulling a tooth."

"But probably a lot more painful," McCoy said. "Maybe even fatally so."

"It did not kill Menen's son. The heat did that. In any event, we have no course available but to try. Since I am already infected, the logical thing to do is to try it on me."

"And risk killing you?" Kirk said. "Things are bad enough already."

"Captain, the strain of maintaining my mental barriers is considerable. I do not know how long I can continue. When my guards go down—as inevitably they must—I will go insane. I would rather die by the hand of a friend. Furthermore, if I am

insane, I am in a position to do the maximum possible amount of damage to the ship."

"Isn't there another question?" Aurelan said. "Mr Spock is only half human. Even if the experiment is successful, it won't be conclusive."

"I have to work with what I have," McCoy said.

"You have Kartan," Aurelan said. "My fiancé."

They all looked at her in silence. When McCoy spoke, his voice was very gentle. "The risk," he said, "is extremely great."

"If you don't find a cure, he will die a raging maniac," she replied calmly. "Do you think I want that?"

McCoy glanced at Kirk, who nodded without hesitation.

"All right," McCoy said. "Thank you. I'll do my best."

It worked nicely. The creature emerged from all sides of Kartan's body at once, as though he were being enclosed in a balloon, and then was torn to shreds under the whirling electromagnets. He was still under sedation, but the dolorimeter promptly declined to normal level, and his face was peaceful for the first time since they had seen him.

"Congratulations, Mr Spock," Kirk said. "And now I want you on that table, as fast as we can get Kartan moved out."

"No, sir."

"Why not? I should think you'd be eager to be rid of it! You volunteered before."

"True, Captain, but since then I have thought of something else. Do you realize that this leaves us just as badly off as we were before?"

Kirk frowned. Given the question, there was no need to explain it. There was absolutely no possibility of enveloping the whole of Deneva in such a field; Deneva's own natural field would fight it, and the *Enterprise* lacked the power to win such an invisible struggle. Nor was there anything like time to treat a million people individually.

McCoy obviously had also chased the chain of reasoning to its conclusion. "We are going to have to destroy the planet anyhow," he said harshly.

Aurelan straightened beside the sleeping Kartan. "Captain," she said. "They're my people. I grew up with them. I loved them. I've

lost my brother. I don't want to lose anyone else. But I beg you, Captain, do what has to be done. Give the order."

"A million people?" Kirk said.

"Don't you understand?" Aurelan cried out. "There's no hope for them! Their brains are on fire! They want to die!"

Kirk stood as if frozen to the floor. "Brains on fire," he whispered. "Brains on fire. That's it. That's the answer!"

"Yes, Captain," Mr Spock said. "That is my conclusion also."

"What is?" McCoy said. "You gentleman have lost me."

"It's like this," Kirk said rapidly. "Spock has already likened this—this composite organism to a gigantic brain. All the evidence we have points in the same direction. The individual cells are mindless, almost lifeless. It's possible, indeed it seems likely, that there is a central concentration of them somewhere. If we could kill that off?"

"I don't see that that follows at all," McCoy said. "The aggregate of the scattered cells could well be all there is to the brain, since we know the cells can communicate with each other. Why is it likely that there should be a concentration, too?"

"Because of the behavior of the creatures," Spock said. "They multiply uncontrollably until they overflow a planet. Not leave it—overflow it. The original central concentration is left behind. *Ergo*, it must still be there—wherever it is."

"And all we know about that is that it's somewhere in the Orion sector," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, could the computer extrapolate the spread of these creatures backward, so to speak, and at least narrow down the possibilities to an area we'd have some hope of searching in time?"

"Of course," Spock said. "But you have something better, Captain."

"What's that?"

"You have me. That is why I do not want the treatment yet. I am infested; I am aware of the creature—not just the part of it that inhabits me, but the entire creature. As we approach the central concentration, I will know."

"Are you sure?"

For answer, Spock pointed. "It lies that way," he said. "I know that already, even though it must be fifty parsecs away."

"Posts!" Kirk shouted.

As they approached the critical Orion sector, it gradually became evident that not only was Spock aware of the nucleus of the creature—it was aware of him, and in some way realized that it must not allow this particular cell of itself to come closer. The pressure on Spock mounted unbearably. Though he still performed his duties, the sweat ran constantly down his face, which occasionally was twisted by a grimace that seemed to have no connection with anything he was doing or saying.

"Better let us extract that thing now," Kirk said. "We're zeroed in on the planet. There's no sense in your suffering any further."

"Sir, I would prefer to bear it just a little while longer. The final test of the theory is what happens to me—or does not happen—when that nucleus is destroyed. If the pain continues, we will know that we were wrong."

"Without prejudice to your own wishes or your will power, Mr Spock, are you certain that there's no danger of your running amok again?"

"The danger exists," Spock said levelly. "However, I am fighting it. And I do not see how we can forfeit this test."

"I hate to say so," McCoy said, "but I think he's right, Jim."

"Very well," Kirk said. He looked at the main viewing screen, which was now showing the image of the target planet. It was utterly barren, though occasional faint geometrical patterns showed where there might once have been cities—before the creatures had come with their burden of agony and wiped them out. "It will be a pleasure to get rid of that monster. Arms Control, are those missiles primed?"

"Yes, sir," said a loudspeaker. "Two fully-armed planet-wreckers, programed and ready to go."

"Very well. Fire one."

A streak of light shot away from the *Enterprise*. For many long minutes nothing seemed to happen. Then the planet on the screen burst into a white blare of atomic fire. The screen backed hastily down the intensity spectrum.

At the same moment, Spock screamed. Two security men promptly grabbed him; Bones had been alert for just such an outcome.

"Stop! Stop!" Spock screamed. "My world—*my life*—"

"Fire two," Kirk said grimly. The planet was already breaking up, but he was taking no chances. Another colossal fusion explosion spread over the screen. When it had died away, there was nothing left to be seen but an enormous, expanding cloud of gas.

“So we have created a new Orion nebula,” Kirk said. He turned to Spock. The first officer was standing quietly in the grip of the security man, while Bones hovered nearby with a hypo.

“Mr Spock?”

Spock’s eyes were glazed, and for a moment he seemed to have no mind at all. His face was blank, his mouth working. Then, gradually, life and sanity seemed to flow back into him.

“I am? recovering,” he said formally. “The pain was? incredible? like nothing I had experienced before. For an instant I was that creature. I felt its death. But now? nothing.”

“Now,” McCoy said firmly, “we take you below and extract that thing from you. I will tolerate no further arguments on that score.”

“No further arguments are necessary,” Spock said. “Its purpose is served.”

“Any word from Deneva, Lieutenant?”

“Rapidly getting back to normal, Captain,” Uhura reported. “Menen says that the remaining creatures just wander about helplessly and seem to have almost no vitality left. To kill one, you need scarcely do more than stick it with a pin.”

“Very good,” Kirk said. “Mr Spock, this may sound grandiose, but it’s the truth. I think you have singlehandedly just saved the galaxy.”

“No, sir, I think not.”

“What could have stopped them if we hadn’t?”

“Their own nature, Captain.”

“Explain.”

“A truly successful parasite,” Spock said, “is commensal, living in amity with its host, or even giving it positive advantages—as, for instance, the protozoans who live in the digestive system of your termites and digest for them the wood that they eat. A parasite that regularly and inevitably kills its hosts cannot survive long, in the evolutionary sense, unless it multiplies with tremendous rapidity—much more rapidly than these creatures did. It is not pro-survival.”

“In the evolutionary sense, maybe,” Kirk said. “But evolution takes a long, long time. In the interim, you have at least saved millions of people from pain, madness and death.”

“Believe me, Captain,” Spock said, “I find that quite sufficient.”

CATSPAW

(Robert Bloch)

The persistent static crackling from Lieutenant Uhura's communications panel was just the minor worry presented by the planet Pyris VII. A dark and forbidding star it had shown itself to be ever since the *Enterprise* had entered its orbit—a chunk of black granite hurled into space to no ostensible purpose, lightless, lifeless except for members of the Starship's landing party beamed down to it for routine investigation and check-in reports. That was the big worry—the absence of any check-in reports. Yet Scott, Sulu and crewman Jackson were all aware of standard landing-group procedure. They knew it required an hourly check-in from any team assigned to explore an unknown planet.

Uhura looked up at Kirk. "Still no response, sir."

"Keep it open."

He frowned at another burst of static from the communications panel. "I don't like this. Nothing since the first check-in. Scott and Sulu should have contacted us half an hour ago."

Spock said, "Perhaps they have nothing to report. Though Pyris VII is a Class M planet capable of sustaining humanoid life, our own people are the only evidence of it our sensors have been able to pick up."

"Nevertheless, Scott and Sulu are obliged to check in, regardless of whether they have anything official to report. Why don't they answer?"

Uhura adjusted a control. A look of relief came into her face. "Contact established, Captain."

Kirk seized the audio. Jackson's voice said, "Jackson to *Enterprise*."

"Kirk here."

"One to beam up, sir."

"One? Jackson, where are Scott and Sulu?"

"I'm ready to beam up, sir."

"Jackson! Where are—" A roar of static overwhelmed his words. Uhura tried to control it; and failed. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't clear it."

"All right," said Kirk. "Notify Transporter Room to prepare to beam up one member of the landing party. Have Dr McCoy report to me in Transporter Room on the double."

"Yes, sir."

It was the measure of their anxiety that Kirk and Spock both ran for the elevator. They opened the door of the Transporter Room to the steady, throbbing hum of thrown switches.

"Ready, sir," the technician said.

"Energize!" The humming rose to a keening pitch and McCoy hurried in with his medikit.

"What's on, Jim?"

"Trouble."

The Transporter platform glowed into dazzle. Then its sparkle gathered into the full figure of crewman Jackson. He stood, stiff and unmoving, his face wiped clean of all expression, his eyes unseeing, fixed in a glassy stare. The hum of materialization faded. Kirk strode to the platform. "Jackson! What happened? Where are the others?"

The mouth moved as though preparing to speak. But Jackson didn't speak. The mouth twisted into a grimace—and Jackson, pitching forward, toppled to the floor.

Kneeling beside him, McCoy looked up at Kirk. He shook his head. "The man's dead, Jim."

Kirk stared down at the body. Its glassy eyes were still fixed on nothing. Then, horribly, the jaw dropped and the mouth opened. Out of it spoke a voice, deep, harsh, guttural. "Captain Kirk, you hear me. There is a curse on your ship. Leave this star. It is death that waits for you here…"

There was a moment of appalled stillness. Jackson's dead mouth still yawned open. But his lips had not moved.

At his desk in Sickbay, McCoy leaned his head on his hand. He didn't look up as Kirk opened the door. Shoulders sagged, he pushed wearily at a heap of tape cartridges in front of him.

"Well?" Kirk said.

McCoy lifted a handful of the cartridges. Then he dropped them. "These are the reports of every test I've run. There's no sign of any injury, none. No organic damage, internal or external."

Kirk was silent for a stretched moment. Scott and Sulu—they were still down there on the planet that had returned a dead man to the *Enterprise*; a dead man whose mouth had been used by that awful voice. "*Then why is Jackson dead, Bones?*"

"He froze to death," McCoy said.

Spock had quietly joined them. "That doesn't seem reasonable, Doctor," he said. "The climate of Pyris VII approximates that of Earth's central Western hemisphere during the summer solstice."

McCoy said irritably, "I know that, Spock. But reasonable or unreasonable, Jackson froze to death. He was literally dead on his feet when he materialized in the Transporter Room."

"He was about to speak," Kirk said.

"He was dead, I tell you!" McCoy shouted.

"Someone spoke." Kirk slowly shook his head. "There seems to be a good deal more to that planet than our sensors have been able to detect! With Scott and Sulu virtually marooned down there…"

He was interrupted by the buzzing intercom on McCoy's desk. He hit the switch. "Kirk here."

Uhura, her voice urgent, said, "Sir, we've lost all traces of Mr Scott and Mr Sulu. The sensors no longer register any indication of life on the planet's surface. That's Mr Farrell's last report."

"Well," said Kirk, "that tears it." He paused. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Have Mr Farrell maintain sensor scan." He snapped off the intercom. "Spock, Bones, get your gear together for a landing party. We're beaming down to find them."

Fog was what they found. Clammy swirls of it drifted around them as they materialized on a twilight world of rock, barren, desolate. From the craggy knoll they stood on, no green was visible—just a gray vista of mist that moved sluggishly, only to reveal more mist, more rock, black fields, black hills of rock.

"Odd," Kirk said. "Our probe data didn't indicate fog."

"Odd, indeed," Spock agreed. "No bodies of water. No cloud formations. No variations in surface temperature. Under such conditions, fog is impossible." He had unslung his tricorder and was taking readings.

"It was impossible for Jackson to freeze to death in this climate," McCoy said. "Yet that's what happened. By the way, just where are we?"

"According to Transporter Room coordinates, this is the exact spot from which Jackson was beamed up to the ship," Spock said. "Readings, Mr Spock?"

"No indication of—wait! I'm picking up a life forms reading at 14 degrees mark 7—distance 137.16 meters." He looked up from the tricorder. "Multiple readings, Captain!"

Astonished, Kirk snapped on his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*"

Static distorted Uhura's voice. "*Enterprise*, Captain."

"How do the ship's sensors read now, Lieutenant?"

"All we're getting are physical impulses from you, Mr Spock and Dr McCoy, sir. There's nothing else alive down there."

The static almost obliterated her last words. "I can hardly hear you, Lieutenant," Kirk said. "Can you hear me?"

His communicator cracked with a crash of static. Disgusted, Kirk snapped it off and was returning it to his belt when McCoy said, "The fog's getting thicker. Maybe it accounts for the interference."

It was getting thicker. Fog rolled around them so dense now that they could scarcely see each other. "There has to be some explanation for the disparity in the readings," Kirk said. "Ours are the only life forms picked up by the ship's sensors but Spock's tricorder registers multiple forms. Do your readings still hold, Mr Spock?"

"No change, sir."

"Phasers on the ready," Kirk said.

Then they all heard it—a high-pitched wailing. Faint at first, it grew in volume to a mournful shrieking. "They must have heard us," McCoy whispered.

"Quiet, Bones!"

McCoy gripped Kirk's arm as he pointed with the other hand. Ahead of them the coiling fog had begun to glow with a greenish, sickly luminescence. Then it gathered, shaping itself into three cloudy faces, vaguely featured, indistinct, wrinkled by a hundred years. Elf locks of wispy white hair hung about them, their sex as blurred as their features. One of the faces spoke.

"Captain Kirk…"

Its long-drawn-out whine had the same creepy cadence as the wailing.

Kirk stepped forward. "Who are you?"

"Go baaack—" wailed the toothless mouth.

The mist was sending the bodiless faces in and out of focus.

"Winds shall rise," one of them whimpered

"And fogs descend…"

"Death is here…"

On a cackle of rheumy laughter, the faces suddenly came apart. Then they dissolved into mist.

Quiet; unmoved, Spock said, "Illusion, Captain." He lowered his tricorder. "They contained neither physical substance nor energy. It may have been a projection of some sort."

"Shakespeare wrote of a blasted heath," Kirk said. "And of warning witches. But why should these have appeared to us? None of us care to become the King of Scotland. Spock, did the life form readings change during that little encounter?"

"They remained the same, Captain."

Kirk nodded. "That may be part of our answer."

They moved on—and an abrupt gust of wind whistled past them. It grew stronger. It should have tattered the fog into shreds. It didn't. The stuff became clammier, more blinding. The wind now rose to a gale force that compelled them to turn their backs to it, clinging to each other for support. "Hang on!" Kirk shouted. As though the words were some form of exorcism, the wind was gone as suddenly as it had come.

Panting, McCoy said, "That was one very realistic illusion." He drew a deep lungful of breath. Then, incredulously, he whispered, "Jim—ahead of us—there…"

It looked like the keep of a medieval castle. It reared itself up before them, huge, battlemented, its masonry of massive stones hoary with age. Its great oaken door, beamed and ironbound, was slightly ajar. On one of the worn steps that led up to it crouched a sleek black cat. A glittering gold chain was hung around its neck. As they approached it, they saw that a translucent crystal pendant was attached to the chain. The pose of the cat suggested it was waiting for something. Mice, perhaps.

Spock said, "This is the source of the life forms reading, Captain. They are inside somewhere."

Kirk tried to use his communicator again, only to be defeated by an explosion of static. Once more he hung it back on his belt.

"Is this how we lost contact with the first landing party?" McCoy wondered.

"What about that, Spock?" Kirk put it to him. "Does this apparent castle have anything to do with the static?"

The Vulcan consulted his tricorder. "I would say not, sir. There's no evidence of anything that would directly cause the interference. Both the castle and the cat are equally real."

"Or unreal," Kirk said. "Some illusions can manifest themselves in solid substance. Why didn't our sensors pick up this castle? And why didn't they register the life forms inside it?" He looked up, frowning, at a turreted wall. "It could be exerting a force field that has cut off our sensor scan."

"Then it would also affect Spock's tricorder, wouldn't it?" McCoy asked.

"Would it? I'm beginning to wonder—" It was as Kirk spoke the last words that the cat mewed, rose gracefully and disappeared through the partly open door. Lost, it seemed, in some private speculation, he watched it go. Then pulling himself out of it briskly, "Well," he said, "if Scott and Sulu are anywhere around, this is the most likely place. Come on."

Phasers in hand, they pushed the door open. A squeaking shrilled over their heads—and a cloud of bats swooped through the door, chittering, their leathery wings almost brushing their faces.

Ducking, McCoy cried, "What the devil was that?"

"Desmodus rufus," Spock said. "Vampire bats."

"That's an Earth species," Kirk said. The cat, moving restlessly before them, mewed again as it turned into the darkness beyond the doorway. He looked after it, the look of private thoughtfulness back on his face. "And so is the cat an Earth species. The plot thickens. Castles, black cats, vampire bats and witches. If we weren't missing two live officers and a dead crewman, I'd say someone was putting on an elaborate Halloween trick or treat."

"Trick or treat, Captain?"

"An old Earth custom, Mr Spock. Explanation later."

The castle walls appeared to be hewn from solid rock. The cat padded silently ahead of Kirk as he and the others groped along the chilly corridor. It was dim, its uncertain light provided by occasional torches whose flames flared and ebbed above their iron sconces, cobwebbed and rusty.

"Dust. Cobwebs. Halloween is right," McCoy said.

The cat slipped around a corner into a darker corner. As they followed, the floor gave way beneath them, and they were plunged into blackness.

Kirk was the first to recover his senses. Someone with a bizarre sense of humor had arranged to place a spiked Iron Maiden right before him. The skull of the human skeleton inside it grinned at him. He refused to be horrified. What concerned him was the discovery that he was shackled to the dungeon's wall. So were Spock and McCoy. Then he realized that all their equipment—phasers, communicators, tricorders—had been removed.

"Mr Spock…"

The Vulcan stirred in his fetters. "I am undamaged, Captain."

"Is Bones all right?"

McCoy spoke for himself. "Nothing broken—just a lot of bruises. What was that you said about trick or treat, Jim?"

"Curses, dungeons, Iron Maidens, skeletons. The point is, these are all Earth manifestations. *Why?*"

"The tricorder registered this castle as real, Jim." McCoy rattled his chains. "And these are no illusion. This place could be an Earth parallel."

"But it would be a parallel only of Earth superstition, Doctor," Spock said. "Something that exists only in the minds of men."

"Exactly," Kirk said. "It's as though—" He broke off. Muffled footsteps had sounded from the corridor outside. A key scraped in the dungeon's lock; to Kirk's astounded relief, its heavy door was swung open by Scott and Sulu.

"Scotty! Sulu! You're safe!"

There was no sign of responsive joy on either of their faces. Silent, stone-faced, Scott pulled a phaser from his belt—and leveled it at them.

"Scotty," Kirk said, "put that phaser down!"

Unmoving, unblinking, Scott maintained the phaser at aim.

"Scott!" Kirk shouted.

"Jim, I think they've been drugged. Look at their eyes—no nictation. They don't blink at all."

"Neither did Jackson," Spock said.

"These two are alive! Scotty, Sulu—do you know who I am?"

Sulu nodded.

"What's happened to you?" Kirk demanded.

For answer, Sulu shuffled past him to lean over McCoy. While Scott covered the *Enterprise* physician with the phaser, Sulu selected a key from a bunch he was carrying on a ring, and inserted it in the bolt's lock that bound the chains to McCoy's

arms. Watching, Kirk said, "They're just taking off the chains, Bones. They're not going to let us go. Are you?"

Silence. In absolute silence, their manacles were unlocked. At the dungeon door, Sulu motioned them into the corridor. Gauging Scott's distance behind him, Kirk whirled around to throw a punch at his jaw. The butt of the phaser caught him in the temple. As he stumbled to his knees, Spock jumped Scott and McCoy made a leap for the unarmed Sulu. But even as they touched them, their faces were lit by the sickly greenish light—and they dissolved into it.

"Stop!"

It was the voice that had spoken through the dead mouth of Jackson.

They stopped. The green glow seemed to have dissolved the corridor and the dungeon, too. All that was familiar was the strangeness of Scott and Sulu. They had reappeared, as unblinking, as blank-faced as before. Everything else was new.

And old. The large chamber to which they'd somehow been transported was heavy with medieval magnificence. Dark tapestries covered its walls. The flare of its sconced torches shone on the bare surface of a huge table, flanked by high-backed chairs. But Kirk's eyes had fixed on a man. He sat on an ornately carved chair, set on a dais that was canopied by a domelike structure. He was bearded, and the long robe he wore glittered with the gold-embroidered symbols of the Zodiac. The black wand he held was topped by a dazzling crystal ball. The cat was stretched out at his feet.

Kirk strode up to the chair. "Whoever you are, you've proved your skill at creating illusions. Now what I want to know is what you have done to my men."

The man leaned forward. "Your race owns a ridiculous predilection for resistance. You question everything. Is it not sufficient for you to accept what is?"

"Not when one of my men is dead and two others have been turned into mindless…"

"Not mindless, Captain Kirk. The live ones are merely—controlled."

Spock and McCoy had made startled movements at the man's use of Kirk's name. They were noted. "Yes, we know you, all of you. Don't we, my precious?" He lowered a hand to stroke the cat.

"Who are you?" Kirk demanded. "Why did you bring us here?"

The bearded mouth smiled. "My name is Korob. As for bringing you here, you insisted upon coming. You were warned away from here."

"For what reason?" Kirk waved a hand that embraced all the mystic trappings of the room and the man. "What is all this—farce about?"

"Farce? I assure you, it is not that, Captain."

Spock spoke. "Clearly, you are unfamiliar with your planet, Korob."

The piercing eyes searched the Vulcan's face. "What did you say?"

"No life exists on your planet," Spock said. "Mapping expeditions have charted this solar system. Their scientific surveys prove that no life forms have ever lived where you appear to live."

The cat stirred, mewing. Lids lowered over the piercing eyes. "That we are not native to this planet is of no importance," Korob said softly.

"It's important to the Federation," Kirk said. "What are you doing here?"

"All in good time, Captain." The cat mewed again, and Korob bent his head as though listening to a secret message. When he raised it, he said, "You must forgive me. I have been an inattentive host. You will join me in something with which to refresh yourselves." Followed by the cat, he rose to lead the way toward the empty table.

"That cat—" McCoy said quietly.

"Yes," Spock said. "It reminds me of certain ancient Earth legends concerning wizards and their 'familiars'—demons in animal form sent by Satan to serve the wizards."

"Superstition," Kirk said.

"I did not create the legends, Captain. I merely repeat them."

Korob turned. "You are the different one, Mr Spock. There are no colors in your patterns of logic. You think only in terms of black and white. You see all this around you. Yet you do not believe in it."

"He doesn't know about trick or treat," McCoy said.

Korob smiled faintly. "I see." He waved toward the empty table. "But, gentlemen, please join me at dinner."

Nobody moved. Scott and Sulu made a menacing move, Scott lifting the phaser. Korob held up his hand. They both backed up to

stand stock-still again. "I had hoped you would be more flexible," Korob said, "but—" He raised his wand.

The green glow grew into a dazzle, dazzling as the crystal ball on the wand's end. The room and all its objects spun in it like dust motes. It blinded Kirk. When he could see again, he, Spock and McCoy were seated at the table. A boar's head gaped in front of him. There was a platter of stuffed peacock. In the tables center a giant beef roast, browned to succulence, was surrounded by silver bowls of fruit, great plates of creamy cheeses. Massive candelabra refracted light on crystal wine decanters and golden goblets. As a display of medieval food and sumptuous service, it was a feast to be seen only by tourists who had booked passage in a Time Machine.

"How in the name of—" McCoy began.

"Not a trick, Doctor," Korob said. "A treat this time. Believe that."

"What do you want from us, Korob?" Kirk asked.

"For the moment, merely that you eat and enjoy yourselves. Please try the wine, Doctor. You will find it excellent."

"No, thank you," McCoy said.

Mewing, the cat suddenly leaped to an empty seat at the table, light glinting from the crystal pendant hung around its neck. Despite his refusal of wine, McCoy's hand reached for the decanter in front of him. He made a visible effort to pull it back—and failed. Kirk made a move toward him only to be slammed back in his chair by Scott.

"Bones…"

"He can't obey you, Captain," Korob said. "He will not be harmed."

Will paralyzed, McCoy poured wine from the decanter into his goblet. The cat, its crystal pendant shining against its black fur, watched steadily as he raised the goblet to his lips. He touched it with them—and the wine burst into vivid red flames.

Clearly alarmed, Korob raised his wand. The flames subsided, and McCoy dashed the goblet to the floor. It vanished, leaving a smell of smoke in the air.

The cat hissed.

Furious, Kirk said, "If you've amused yourself sufficiently, Korob…"

But Korob's eyes were on the cat. "That was not my wish," he said. "I—perhaps I can make proper amends."

The black wand pointed to the table's empty plates. They filled with gems, pricelessly exotic jewels come together in their multicolored glitter from the multiworlds of the galaxy—the ruby reds of what were not rubies, the sapphire blues of what were not sapphires but the alien treasures of an unearthly star system.

"They look genuine," McCoy said.

"They are, I assure you," Korob said. "That is a masgar, Doctor—a lorinium—a pavonite. There is a fortune for each of you in the richest gems of the galaxy if you will leave here without further query."

"We are not ready to leave here," Kirk said quietly.

"Captain, you are a stubborn and unreasonable man. However, you have passed the tests."

"Tests?" McCoy queried.

Korob nodded. "You proved your loyalty by coming here to rescue your comrades in spite of warnings to stay away. Your courage was also tested. I learned you couldn't be frightened. Now I've learned that you can't be bribed. I congratulate you."

The cat mewed. Korob patted it. "Quite right," he said. "Go at once." The animal jumped from the chair and was gone through the tapestried archway at the other end of the chamber.

Kirk got up. "All right. Now that you've tested our integrity, suppose you demonstrate yours."

"Gladly, Captain."

"Begin by explaining what you've done to Scott and Sulu. How are you 'controlling' them?"

"I cannot answer that question," Korob said. "But I have sent for someone who can."

That someone entered, a tall, slim woman. Her black hair, parted in the center above her aquiline features, fell below her waist. Perhaps it was her high cheekbones that gave her green eyes an oblique look. On the breast of her red gown she wore a crystal pendant like the one they had seen on the cat.

Korob said, "This is my colleague, Sylvia."

As she approached Kirk, he became conscious of her remarkable grace. Bowing slightly, she said, "Captain Kirk, I understand you want to know what we did to your men. We probed their minds. For us it is a simple matter to probe the minds of creatures like yourself."

"Hypnosis?" Spock asked.

She ignored him to move to McCoy. As she did so, she said, "Our methods go a little deeper than hypnosis." McCoy made no comment. Eyes held by the glowing pendant, he had gone suddenly rigid, unblinking. She smiled at him. "Let me tell you what you said of the man Jackson who was returned to your ship. You said, "There's no sign of any injury… no organic damage, internal or external. The man simply froze to death.'"

"How do you know that?" Kirk was watching her closely.

The green eyes turned to him. "You like to think of yourselves as complex creatures, Captain, but you are flawed. Your minds have many doors. Most of them are left unguarded. We enter your minds through those unguarded doors."

"Telepathy?" Spock suggested.

This time she answered him. "Not entirely. Telepathy does not include control. And I assure you, I am in full control of your friends."

Abruptly, Kirk lost patience with the charming lady and her conversation. Moving swiftly, he shoved his heavy chair back into Scott. Scott stumbled, losing his guard stance behind the chair. He lost his phaser, too; Kirk grabbed it from him all in that same swift, unexpected movement. Scott, recovering his balance, lunged. Kirk leveled the phaser at him. He backed up, and the phaser swung around to cover all of them—Sylvia, Korob, Sulu, Scott.

"Don't move—any of you!" Kirk said.

McCoy relaxed. His eyes blinked. Kirk motioned Scott and Sulu over to Korob, the phaser steady in his hand. "No more hocus-pocus!" he said. "Korob, I want our other weapons and our equipment. I want them now. I also want some answers—real ones."

Sylvia said, "Put that weapon down, Captain."

Kirk laughed. The green eyes didn't flash with anger. They merely regarded him appraisingly. Then, reaching a hand into a pocket slit in her gown, Sylvia withdrew from it what appeared to be a small silver toy. She left Kirk to go to Spock and McCoy.

"Do you recognize this?" she asked them.

"It looks like a miniature model of the *Enterprise*" McCoy said.

"No. In a sense it *is* the *Enterprise*."

Frowning, Spock said, "Where did you get it?"

"From the minds of your two crew members. I absorbed then: knowledge of the ship."

"With what purpose in *your* mind?" Spock asked.

She moved to the table where the huge candelabra held its tall, lit candles. "In the mythology of your race," she said, "this is called 'sympathetic magic,' Captain. One may call it what one chooses. It is an interesting tool."

Kirk, still holding the phaser on Korob, spoke over his shoulder. "Lady," he said, "that won't do as an explanation."

Spock's face had grown grave. He watched her intently as she stood at the table, the candlelight throwing come-and-go shadows across her face. "Jackson," she said, "you all wondered why he froze to death in a moderate climate. How is *this* explanation, Captain? I made an exact image of him. Then I froze the image. When I knew it was frozen, he died."

"Rubbish!" Kirk said. "You can't *think* a man to death!"

"Your communicator is in the pocket of Korob's robe, Captain. Please take it."

He hesitated a moment before he obeyed. As he turned, he saw that she was holding the toy model of *Enterprise* about six inches above a candle flame. "Signal your ship," she said.

He clicked the communicator open. Uneasy in spite of himself, he realized that she had lowered the silver model closer to the candle flame.

Korob said, "Sylvia—don't…"

The model sank closer to the candle flame; and Kirk spoke hastily into the communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*! *Enterprise*, come in, please. Kirk here. Come in…"

"Captain, it's you!" It was Uhura's voice but there was desperation in it. "Where are you? We can't?"

"Never mind us. What's happening up there?"

"Something's—gone wrong with the temperature control. We—can't locate it. The heat has risen—sixty degrees in the past thirty seconds. The *Enterprise* is burning up, sir…"

"Beef up the refrigerator units, Lieutenant!"

The voice came more weakly now. "We did, sir—but they're—breaking down…"

Kirk, visualizing his Starship, saw it streaking through space like a comet on fire. He imagined Uhura and Farrell, hanging onto their posts, gasping for air, their uniforms sweat drenched. "The heat will go," he said. "I'll take care of it, Lieutenant."

He snapped off the communicator, walked over to Korob and returned it to him. "All right," he told Sylvia. "You can stop it now." He handed the phaser, too, to Korob.

She removed the little ship from the flame.

"Now that you've seen our science," Korob said, "perhaps you'd better tell us something of yours."

"I'd rather know more about yours," Kirk said. "First you call it magic. Now it's science. Which is it?"

"What would you call it, Captain?"

"Transmutation—telekinesis. You seem to have a strange ability, not just to change the molecular structure of objects, but to move them from point to point by merely willing it. What could you want with our comparatively clumsy science?"

"Ours requires machines, matter, energy, chemicals," Spock added. "Compared with your techniques, it is imperfect and cumbersome. Then why is it important to you?"

"There are things you know that we do not. We can alter the molecular structure of matter. But you can release the energy within it."

"Korob! You talk too much!" Sylvia snapped. Recovering herself, she went on, "Besides, you three are not so specialized as those two." She indicated the motionless figures of Scott and Sulu. "That one thinks only of machines. The other's mind is full of trivia, thoughts about his collections, the physical exertions he calls exercises. But in your minds is an accumulated knowledge of worlds, of this galaxy."

"If so, in our minds is where the knowledge stays," Kirk said.

"You have used Scott and Sulu as catspaws," McCoy said. "You used them to lure us down here. How did you know we'd come?"

"They knew you'd come," Korob smiled.

"Enough of this," Sylvia said impatiently. "You will tell us what we want to know, one way or another!"

"It's a little late for threats," Kirk said. "I contacted my ship, remember? How long do you think it'll be before there's another landing party here?"

"Quite some time," Korob said. He touched the tiny ship on the table with the crystal ball of his wand. The now familiar greenish light glowed over it. When it faded, the model was encased in a solid block of crystal. "An impenetrable force field now surrounds your ship, Captain. It will not hinder orbit. It does, however, make prisoners of everybody inside your ship."

"I advise you to cooperate, Captain," Sylvia said. "Though it is simple to extract the information we want by forcible means, they

are extremely painful. And they have a certain—draining effect." She waved a hand toward Scott and Sulu.

"We have nothing to discuss," Kirk said.

Korob turned to Scott and Sulu. "Take them back to their cell."

"Wait." Sylvia's green eyes moved over them, cold, icily analytical. "The Doctor will stay."

"Bones—" Kirk began.

"Don't waste your sympathy, Captain. You will be next. It really makes little difference." She turned, speaking sharply to Scott and Sulu. "Take the others away."

Korob handed Sulu the phaser. It thrust hard into Kirk's back as he and Spock were herded from the chamber.

This time his shackles seemed tighter to Kirk. His eyes fixed anxiously on the dungeon door, he moved restlessly in the chains, feeling them grind into his flesh.

"How long has it been?" he fretted.

"Twenty-two minutes, seventeen seconds," Spock said.

The question gnawing at Kirk burst out of him. "What are they doing to him?"

"Perhaps," Spock said, "the real question is '*what* are they?' They've admitted they are alien to this planet. And I find their total ignorance of our instrumentality and science most curious."

Kirk gave him an interested glance. "They also refer to us as 'creatures,' as though our species were unfamiliar to them."

Spock nodded. "The fact that everything around us seems solid and real may not be the fact. Sylvia and Korob look humanoid. But they fabricated that food and the gems. They may also have fabricated the way they appear to us. Suppose they are not biped humanoids? Suppose they've just drawn all this from the subconscious minds of Scott and Sulu?"

Kirk frowned. "Scotty and Sulu are responsible men. They are not prone to superstition." He paused to digest Spock's speculations. "But Scott, it's true, does *have* a heritage that includes castles, dungeons and witches in its lore. And Sulu—Oriental folk tales also admit the influence of ghosts and spirits."

"Children are still fond of ghost stories, Captain. Even I grew up with a knowledge of them, much to my father's dismay. Perhaps we are all subconsciously afraid of dark rooms, of spectral visions

—and this is what these aliens are using to try and gain the information they want."

"But they don't want just our science," Kirk reminded him. "What they're after is knowledge about our worlds—the galaxy itself." He was about to add "*Why?*" when the key scraped in the lock of the dungeon's door.

It opened. Sulu, phaser in hand, pushed McCoy through it. He didn't resist the shove. He just stood there, unblinking, his face emptied of all human expression.

"Ah, Bones, Bones—" Kirk groaned.

But Sulu had bent over him and was unlocking his chains. Then McCoy shambled over to him. He jerked Kirk to his feet, and placing him carefully in line with Sum's pointed phaser, kicked him toward the open dungeon door.

Sylvia's method for making an obedient imbecile out of McCoy had disturbed Korob. As they awaited Kirk's arrival in the castle's great hall, he put his agitation into words.

"There's no need to torture them!"

"They resist," she said.

"You tease them! You promise them toys and then watch them scream in pain when they reach out to touch them. It amuses you!"

She shrugged. "And if it does, that does not concern you. I get the information I want for the Old Ones; and to get it is why we were sent here."

"You must *stop!*" Korob cried. "At least, let the pain be brief!"

"You cannot command me, Korob. We are equals."

"But not the same," he said.

"No. You are weak. I am strong. That is the reason I was chosen by the Old Ones to come with you. They suspect you of weakness. I am the one they—" She stopped at the appearance of Kirk between McCoy and Sulu.

Her lips moved into a charming smile. In the voice of a hostess greeting a distinguished guest, she said, "Captain, how nice to see you. I'm so glad you have come." The welcoming smile still on her mouth, she turned to Korob. "Leave us—and take those two with you."

Korob hesitated. Then, making Sylvia a formal bow, he picked up the *Enterprise* in its transparent casing—and left the chamber,

followed by the listless Sulu and McCoy.

Kirk and Sylvia eyed each other. For the first time he sensed tension in her, a certain wariness as though she knew she'd met her match in strength. The smile he gave her was just as charming as the one that still lingered on her face. "What now?" he said pleasantly. "Do you wave your magic wand and destroy my mind, too?"

He didn't miss the involuntary start, she gave at mention of the wand. He also noted how her hand had lifted to touch the crystal pendant on her breast. "There's no real damage done to the mind, Captain, just a drain of knowledge and will."

"You don't call that damage?"

"Why should I when it isn't?" she responded easily.

His eyes swept over her in the immemorial look of the sexually appraising male. "You must forgive me," he said. "I forget that you are not a woman. Perhaps not even human."

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"All this—" he waved his hand around the room, "all this apparently drawn from our racial superstitions and fantasies. Illusion—the whole thing."

She pointed to one of the wall torches. "Put your hand in that flame and you will be burned, Captain. However created, these things are quite real. I am real, too."

"Why do you need us?" he said.

She walked over to the table. When she turned to face him again, she said, "What does your science teach you about the nature of the universe?" ,

He laughed. "There's nothing I enjoy so much as discussions on the nature of the universe. Particularly with charming ladies." He gave her a mocking little bow. "You didn't answer my question, you know. Why do you need us?"

"I don't need the others. Nor do you."

She spoke softly. Now she left the table to move closer to him. Human or not, she *was* graceful. "If we combined what you know and I know," she said, "there's no limit to the power we would possess."

"And Korob?" he said.

One thing she *did* know, he was thinking—how to exert sexual witchcraft. She'd laid her hand lightly, very lightly on his forearm. "Korob is a weak and foolish man," she said. "He can be disposed of. But I would find it difficult to dispose of—you."

He smiled down into the green eyes. "Or to probe my mind?"

"That would not be necessary if we mingled our knowledge," she said. "From me you could learn secrets you've never dreamed of. Anything you imagined could be yours…"

The hand was slowly moving up his arm. "Your—arguments are quite persuasive," he said. "Suppose I decided to go along with you?"

Her low murmur was a caress. "You would not regret your decision. Power, wealth, all the luxuries of your galaxy would be yours."

"You're a very beautiful woman," he said—and meant it.

"I can be many beautiful women," she said. The green eyes upturned to his were suddenly sapphire blue. The long black hair disappeared and became a shining tumble of blond curls. Even her red robe drained of its color to change into a creamy white that matched the flawless cream of her skin. Then the blond beauty was gone. Copper braids wreathed her head. The robe deepened to a rich bronze. She was an autumn beauty now, her cheeks flushed with the tone of autumn leaves.

"Do you like me thus?" she asked. "Or do you prefer this?"

She recovered her original appearance.

"I prefer this," Kirk said—and took her in his arms. When she lifted her head from his kiss, she was staring at him with surprised delight. "That was very—enjoyable. What is it called? May I have another?"

He kissed her again. Then he released her. "Your people will guarantee me that I won't be harmed?"

"Yes, when they come. I have only to report to the Old Ones that you will cooperate with us."

"And my friends will be restored to their former condition?"

"Of course—if you wish it."

She reached up her arms to his neck but he removed them.

"What's wrong? What wrong have I done?"

He stepped away from her. "When you took the form of a woman," he said, "you also assumed the female compulsion to talk too much. You've revealed too many secrets, Sylvia. What if your Old Ones find out you've been tricked by one of the creatures you plan to conquer?"

"You tricked me? You do not like me?"

"No," he said.

"Then you just used me?"

"Didn't you plan to use me?"

Her green eyes blazed. She clapped her hands sharply. Scott and McCoy, both armed with phasers, came through the tapestried archway.

She pointed a shaking, sharp-nailed finger at Kirk. "Get him out of here! Take him back to his cell!"

It was Korob who came to release him from his shackles.

But in spite of the phaser in his hand, he seemed hurried, anxious. Kirk and Spock watched him in tense silence as he unlocked their chains. To their astonishment, they were no sooner freed than he handed Kirk the phaser and pulled the communicator from his robe's pocket.

He spoke in a whisper. "I have broken the crystal that imprisoned the model of your ship, Captain. It was time. Your people had found a way to break out of the force field. It is difficult to control so many things. You must go now before she discovers the weapon is missing."

"We can't leave without our men," Kirk said.

Korob made an impatient gesture. "They are not your men any longer. They belong to Sylvia. I can no longer control them—or her."

He glanced fearfully at the dungeon door. "There was no need for any of this. We could have entered your galaxy in peace. But Sylvia is not content with conquest. She is close to the Old Ones and she wants to destroy."

"You came in a ship?" Spock asked.

Korob shook his head. "We used a power pack." He motioned to the door. "There's no time to explain now. We must go. She plans to kill us all."

Kirk and Spock had started to follow him to the door when Korob suddenly turned, stopping them with a warning gesture. They both heard it at the same time—the sound of a deep, resonant purr. Then through the open door of the cell they saw the shadow; the creeping shadow of a great cat silhouetted against the farther wall of the corridor.

"Keep back," Korob muttered.

He drew his wand from his robe. Holding it poised, he slid into the corridor toward the cat's shadow. But already it had begun to

grow in size and was looming black, gigantic against the corridor wall. And the purr had changed. Ferocity had entered into its deep growl. Snarling, the cat now towered over a Korob whose face had convulsed with terror. He lifted his wand, shouting, "No, no—get back! *No!*"

The shadow lifted a monstrous paw. Korob screamed, crumpled, the wand falling from his hand. Kirk and Spock ran to reach him. There was an animal roar of rage as the huge paw lifted again. Kirk had barely time to seize the wand before Spock grabbed him —and slammed the dungeon door closed behind them.

A latch on its outside clanked into its slot. They were locked into the cell again.

Its door shook as some immense body pushed against it. Maddened roars rebounded in echoes from the corridor as the unseen monster cat hurled itself against the door again. Spock shouted, "It won't hold long against such pressure, sir!"

"Move back," Kirk said. He aimed the phaser at the door and fired. There was no effect. "It's out of energy," he said, examining the weapon. "She must have drained it. We could have jumped Scott or Sulu any time—and we never knew it." He glanced around the cell. "There's no way out of here."

"Only one," Spock said. "The way we got in." Another thud shook the door. Kirk said, "This wall's too smooth to climb."

Spock had his eyes on the trapdoor above his head. "If you were to boost me up, sir, I could pull you up from there."

"It's a good eight feet. Think you can make it?"

"Ready when you are, Captain." Kirk nodded, laid the wand on the floor, and bending his back, braced himself on spread legs as Spock climbed up on his shoulders. The Vulcan got his grip on the trapdoor opening. He hauled himself up through it, and Kirk, retrieving the wand, reached for the hand Spock extended down to him. As he found his own grip on the opening, the cell door crashed down. The cat's head, lips drawn back over its teeth, filled the empty space. It opened its jaws in a scream of rage.

Breathless, Kirk said, "That's what I call a close thing. Where are McCoy and the others?"

"Maybe we should return with weapons and another landing party, Captain."

"I'm not leaving them here," Kirk said. He moved on, and was leading the way along the dimly lit passage when Spock paused. "I don't think this is the way we came, Captain."

"Maybe, maybe not," Kirk said. "It's like a maze in here. Look, there's a turn ahead there. And we *did* come around a turn…"

Perhaps it was a sound, not a sixth sense that warned him. He whirled just in time to avoid a blow by the mace McCoy held in both hands. As it struck the wall with a shattering clang, Scott darted from the shadowy angle of the corridor to lift a mace above Spock's head. Spock ducked its swoop and closed with Scott, applying his Vulcan neck pinch. It felled Scott who dropped his weapon. Spock simultaneously shouted, "Behind you, sir!"

Kirk had just toppled McCoy with a punch to the jaw. Now he wheeled, to be smashed against the wall by Sulu's booted foot. He grabbed it and brought Sulu crashing down on top of him, knocked out.

He looked up at Spock. "You were right. We *did* take the wrong turn—but at least we found them."

"I'd hardly call it that, Captain. But now that we do have them all together…"

The snarling roar sounded very close. The shadow of the immense cat grew blacker and blacker on the corridor wall. Its claws were extending from one enormous paw.

Kirk lifted the wand. "This," he said, "is your 'power pack,' isn't it, Sylvia?"

The cat's shadow vanished. Sylvia, dark hatred, red robed, stood against the wall.

Kirk fingered the wand. "This crystal—and the one you wear—both serve as the source of your power, don't they?"

"The source? No, Captain, the mind is the wellspring of our power. My crystal is merely an amplifier. The wand controls much more."

"With such power at your command, what did you want of us?" Spock asked her.

"I have wanted nothing of you, Mr Spock. Your mind is a deep well of facts. It is the people of Earth I wanted. Their minds are the deep wells of dreams—the material we need to create our realities."

"You consume the minds of others," Kirk said. "What happens to them when you've used their minds to increase your power?"

"Why do you care?" she countered. "With that wand you hold in your hand, you could reach out and shatter the stars if you knew how to use it." Her voice softened. "I offered once to share power with you. I offer again."

"No," Kirk said. "I don't know what you are. All I know is that you are not a woman. You are a destroyer."

"That's enough," she said. A phaser appeared in her hand. She aimed it at Kirk. "Give me the wand."

She extended her free hand, palm upward. "The wand—give it to me."

Kirk shrugged in surrender and held out the wand. She reached for it—and he dashed it to the stone floor. Sylvia screamed. Its crystal shattered. A blinding red light lit the corridor with the crimson of blood. It changed into the yellow dazzle of the sun. Then it was white like the light of a dead moon. When it faded, Kirk was standing on a rocky knoll. All around him was the bleak and barren surface of Pyris VII just as he'd first seen it. Only the fog was missing.

Dazed, McCoy said, "What happened, Jim?"

"That will take some explaining, Bones," Kirk told him.

Scott, recovered, said to Sulu, "Everything's vanished."

"Not quite everything," volunteered Spock.

On a rock ledge before them lay two tiny creatures, boneless, mere blobs of jelly, their bodies veined like those of jellyfish. One moved feebly. The other wavered up into the air, squeaking in a thin wail.

"Meet Korob and Sylvia in their true shape," Kirk said. "Their human shapes, like the castle and everything else, were illusion. Only the wand's crystal ball gave them an appearance of reality."

Spock's impassive face had a rare look of fascinated curiosity.

"A life form totally alien to our galaxy. If only we could study and preserve them."

The squeaking little creature was waving its transparent filaments over the now unmoving body of its companion. Soon, collapsing in on itself, it sank down beside it, its pitiful wail growing fainter.

"It's too late," McCoy said. "They're gone."

He sighed. "Illusion and reality. Sometimes I wonder if we humans will ever learn the difference."

METAMORPHOSIS

(Gene L. Coon)

It was not often that the *Enterprise* needed the services of her shuttlecraft *Galileo,* for usually the Transporter served her purposes better; but this was one of those times. The *Enterprise* had been on other duty when the distress call had come from Epsilon Canaris III, well out of Transporter range, and not even the *Enterprise* could be in two places at once.

Now, however, the *Galileo* was heading back for rendezvous with the mother ship, Kirk at the controls, Spock navigating. The shuttlecraft's passengers were Dr McCoy and his patient, Assistant Federation Commissioner Nancy Hedford, a very beautiful woman in her early thirties, whose beauty was marred by an almost constant expression of sullenness. The expression did not belie her; she was not a particularly pleasant person to be around.

"We have reached projected point three, Captain," Spock said. "Adjust to new course 201 mark 15."

"Thank you, Mr Spock… Doctor, how is she?"

"No change."

"Small thanks to the Starfleet," Nancy Hedford said.

"Really, Commissioner," McCoy said, "you can't blame the Starfleet—"

"I should have received the proper inoculation ahead of time."

"Sukaro's disease is extremely rare, Commissioner. The chances of anyone contracting it are literally billions to one. How could we predict—"

"I was sent to that planet to prevent a war, Doctor. Thanks to the inefficiency of the medical branch of the Starfleet I have been forced to leave before my job was done. How many millions of innocent people will die because of this so-called rare disease of mine?"

Privately, Kirk was of the opinion that she was overestimating her own importance; her senior officer could probably handle the situation alone—or maybe even better. But it wouldn't do to say

so. "Commissioner, I assure you, once we reach the *Enterprise,* with its medical facilities, we'll have you back on your feet in no time. You'll get back to your job."

"And just how soon will we rendezvous with this ship of yours, Captain?"

"Four hours and twenty-one minutes."

"Captain," Spock said. "The scanners are picking up some kind of small nebulosity ahead. It seems to be—yes, it is on a collision course."

"It can hardly matter," Kirk said, "but we'll swerve for it anyhow."

This, however, proved impossible to do. Every time Kirk changed the *Galileo's* course, the cloud did also. Soon it was within visual distance, a phosphorescent, twisting blob against the immensities of space.

Spock checked the sensors. "It appears to be mostly ionized hydrogen, Captain. But I would say nevertheless that it is not a natural object. It is too dense, changes shape too rapidly, and there is a high degree of electrical activity."

"Whatever it is, we're about to be right in the middle of it."

He had scarcely spoken when the view ahead was completely masked by the glowing, shifting cloud. A moment later, the controls went dead. A quick check showed that communications were out, too.

"Readings, Mr Spock?"

"Extremely complex patterns of electrical impulses, and an intense magnetic field—or rather, a number of them. It seems to have locked onto us."

The craft lurched, slightly but definitely. Kirk looked down at his console. "Yes, and it's taking us with it."

"Captain!" the woman's voice called. "What's happening? I demand to know!"

"You already know about as much as we do, Commissioner. Whatever that thing is outside, it's pulling us off our course for the *Enterprise.*"

"Now on course 98 mark 12," Spock said. "Heading straight into the Gamma Canaris region."

"Jim!" McCoy said. "We've got to get Miss Hedford to the *Enterprise*—her condition—"

"I'm sorry, Bones. There's nothing we can do."

"I am not at all surprised," Miss Hedford said coldly. "This is exactly the sort of thing I expect from the Starfleet. If I am as sick

as this dubious authority claims I am—”

“Believe me, you are,” McCoy said. “You may feel fine now, but nevertheless you’re very ill.”

“Then why are you all just sitting there? I insist—”

“I’m sorry, Commissioner,” Kirk said. “We’ll do what we can when we can—but right now we’re helpless. You might as well sit back and enjoy the ride.”

The *Galileo* was put down—there seemed to be no other word for it—on a small planet, of which very few details could be seen through the enveloping nebulosity. But the moment they had grounded, the cloud vanished, leaving them staring out at a broad, deserted sweep of heathlike countryside.

“Bones, Mr Spock, get some readings on this place.” Kirk snapped a switch. “*Enterprise,* this is the *Galileo.* Kirk here. Come in, please. Come in… no good, we’re not sending. That cloud must still be around someplace. Any data, anybody?”

“The atmosphere is almost identical with that of the Earth,” Spock reported, “and so is the gravity. Almost impossible for a planet this small, unless the core is something other than the usual nickel-iron. But suitable for human life.”

“Well, I guess we get out and get under,” Kirk said."Bones, phaser out and maintain full alert. Commissioner, best you stay inside for the time being.”

“And just how long a time is that?”

“That’s a very good question. I wish I could answer it. Mr Spock, let’s go.”

Outside, they went to the rear of the shuttlecraft and unbolted the access panels to the machinery, while McCoy stayed up forward. Checking the works did not take long.

“Very strange,” Spock said. “In fact, quite impossible.”

“Nothing works.”

“Nothing. And for no reason.”

“Of course there’s a reason. We just haven’t found it yet. Let’s go over it again.”

While they were at it, Nancy Hedford came out and headed for them, looking, as usual, both annoyed and officious. Patience was evidently not her strong point, either. Kirk sighed and straightened.

“Well, Captain?”

"Well, Commissioner?"

"Where is this strange powerful force of yours, which brought us here? Or could it be that you simply made a navigational error?"

"There was no error, Miss Hedford," Kirk said patiently. "For your information, our power units are dead—so I judge that the force you refer to is still in the vicinity."

"I am not interested in alibis, Captain. I insist that you get us off this dismal rock immediately."

"Commissioner, I realize that you're ill, and you're anxious to receive treatment."

"I am anxious, as you put it, to get this medical nonsense out of the way so I can get back to my assignment!"

McCoy, looking rather anxious himself, had joined them. He said, "How do you feel, Commissioner?"

"I wish you would stop asking that stupid question." She strode angrily away.

Kirk managed a rueful grin. "As long as she answers you like that, Bones, I guess she feels all right."

"But she won't for long. The fever's due to hit any time."

As Kirk started to reply, there was a long, hailing call from no very great distance. "Hallllooooo!"

They turned, startled. A human figure had emerged from over the horizon, which on this small world was no more than a mile away. It waved its arms, and came toward them at a run.

"Bones, I want a physiological reading on—whoever that is."

The figure disappeared behind a rise, and then appeared at the top of it, looking down on the party. It was a young, sturdy, tall, handsome man in his mid-thirties, dressed in a one-piece suit of coveralls. His expression was joyful.

"Hello!" he said again, plunging down the rise to them. "Are you real? I mean—I'm not imagining you, am I?"

"We're real enough," Kirk said.

"And you speak English. Earth people?"

Kirk nodded. "From the Federation."

"The Federation? Well, it doesn't matter." He grabbed Kirk's hand enthusiastically. "I'm Cochrane. Been marooned here who knows how long. If you knew how good it was to see you… and a woman! A beautiful one at that. Well!"

Kirk made the introductions. Cochrane, still staring at the Commissioner, said, "You're food to a starving man. All of you." He

looked over to Spock. "A Vulcan, aren't you. When I was there—hey, there's a nice ship. Simple, clean. Been trying to get her going again? Forget it. It won't work."

He began to circle the shuttlecraft, admiringly. Kirk said in a low voice to McCoy, "Our friend seems to have a grasshopper mind."

"Too many things to take in all at once. Normal reaction. In fact, everything checks out perfectly normal. He's human."

"Mr Cochrane!" The newcomer rejoined them, still beaming. "We were forced off our course and brought here by some power we couldn't identify—which seems to be here on the surface of the planet at the moment."

"Could be. Strange things happen in space."

"You said we wouldn't be able to get the ship functioning again?" Spock asked.

"Not a chance. Damping field of some sort down here. Power systems don't work. Take my word for it."

"You won't mind if we keep trying?" Spock persisted.

"Go right ahead. You'll have plenty of time."

"How about you, Cochrane?" Kirk said. "What are you doing here?"

"Marooned. I told you. Look, we've got lots of time to learn about each other. I've got a little place not far away. All the comforts of home." He turned to the woman. "I can even offer you a hot bath."

"How acute of you to notice that I needed it," she said icily.

"If you don't mind, Mr Cochrane," Kirk said, "I'd like a little more than just the statement that you were marooned here. This is a long way off the beaten path."

"That's right. That's why I'm so glad to see you. Look, I'll tell you everything you want to know. But not here." He eyed the shuttlecraft again. "A beauty."

"You've been out of circulation a while. Maybe the principles are new to you. Mr Spock, would you like to explain our propulsion methods to Mr Cochrane?"

"Of course, Captain. Mr Cochrane?"

As the two moved off, McCoy said, "He talks a lot but he doesn't say much."

"I noticed," Kirk said. "And I noticed something else. There's something familiar about him, Bones."

"Familiar?… well, now that you mention it, I think so too."

"I can't place him, but… how about Miss Hedford?"

"No temperature yet. But we've got to get under way soon. I guarantee you it'll develop."

"You're sure there's no mistake? It is Sakuro's disease?"

"Positive. And something else I'm not mistaken about. Untreated, it's fatal. Always… well, what do we do now?"

"I think we'll take Mr Cochrane up on his offer. At least we can make her comfortable."

Cochrane's house was a simple functional cube, with a door, but no windows. The surrounding area was cultivated.

"You built this, Mr Cochrane?" Spock said.

"Yes. I had some tools and supplies left over from my crash. It's not Earth, of course, but it's livable. I grow vegetables, as you see. Come on in."

He led the way. The house contained a heating unit which apparently served as a stove, a climate control device, and some reasonably comfortable furniture, all decidedly old. Miss Hedford looked around with distaste.

"What a dreadful, dingy place," she said.

Cochrane only smiled. "But I call it home, Miss Hedford."

"Where did you get the antiques?" Kirk said.

"The antiques? Oh, you mean my gadgets. I imagine things have changed a lot since I wrecked."

"Not that much."

"Must you keep it so terribly hot?" the woman asked.

"The temperature is a constant seventy-two degrees."

"Do you feel hot?" McCoy asked Miss Hedford.

She flopped angrily down in a chair. "I feel infuriated, deeply put upon, absolutely outraged."

"It was quite a hike here," McCoy said. "You're tired. Just take it easy for a while."

"I'll rest later, Doctor. Right now I am planning the report I will make to the Board of Commissioners on the efficiency of the Starfleet. I assure all of you it will be very, very complete."

"Captain! Doctor!" Spock called from the door. "Look at this, please!"

Alarmed at the urgency in his voice, Kirk crossed to the door in one bound. Outside, perhaps half a mile away, was a columnar area of blurry, misty interference, like a tame whirlwind, except that there was no wind. Faint pastel lights and shades appeared and disappeared inside it. With it there was a half sound, half feeling of soft chiming music. For a moment it moved from side to side, gently; then it disappeared.

Kirk turned quickly to Cochrane. "What was that?"

"Sometimes the light plays tricks on you," Cochrane said. "You'd be surprised what I've imagined I've seen around here."

"We imagined nothing, Mr Cochrane. There was an entity out there, and I suspect it was the same entity that brought us here. Please explain."

"There's nothing to explain."

"Mr Cochrane, you'll find I have a low tolerance level where the safety of my people are concerned. We find you out here where no human has any business being. We were virtually hijacked in space and brought here—apparently by that thing we just saw out there. I am not just requesting an explanation, Mister. I am demanding it!"

Cochrane shrugged. "All right. Out there—that was the Companion."

"The what?"

"That's what I call it. The fact is, Captain, I did not crash here. I was brought here in my disabled ship. I was almost dead. The Companion saved my life."

"You seem perfectly healthy now," Kirk said. "What was wrong?"

"Old age, Captain. I was eighty-seven years old at the time. I don't know how it did it, but the Companion rejuvenated me. Made me—well—young again, like I am now."

Kirk and Spock exchanged glances. Spock's eyebrows were about to crawl right off the top of his forehead. He said, "I would like to reserve judgment on that part of your story, sir. Would you mind telling us exactly what this Companion of yours is?"

"I told you, I don't know what it is. It exists. It lives. I can communicate with it to a limited extent."

"That's a pretty far-out story," McCoy said.

"You saw the creature. Have you a better story?"

"Mr Cochrane," Kirk said. "Do you have a first name?"

Cochrane nodded. "Zefram."

McCoy's jaw dropped, but Spock had apparently been expecting the answer. Kirk said, "Cochrane of Alpha Centauri? The discoverer of the space warp?"

"That's right, Captain."

"Zefram Cochrane," McCoy said, "has been dead a hundred and fifty years."

"His body was never found," Spock said.

"You're looking at it, Mr Spock," Cochrane said.

"You say this Companion of yours found you and rejuvenated you. What were you doing in space at the age of eighty-seven?"

"I was tired, Captain. I was going to die. And I wanted to die in space. That's all."

McCoy turned to Miss Hedford, whose eyes were now closed. He felt her forehead, then took readings. He was obviously concerned by the results.

"These devices," Spock said. "They all date from the time indicated. From your ship, Mr Cochrane?"

"I cannibalized it. The rest-—the food, water, gardens, everything I need—the Companion gives me. Creates it, apparently, out of the native elements."

"If you can communicate with it," Kirk said, "maybe you can find out what *we* are doing here."

"I already know."

"You wouldn't mind telling us?"

"You won't like it."

"We already don't like it."

"You're here to keep me company," Cochrane said. "I was always pretty much of a loner. Spent years in space by myself. At first being alone here didn't bother me. But a hundred and fifty years is a long time, Kirk. Too long. I finally told the Companion I'd die without the company of other humans. I thought it would release me—send me back somehow. Instead, it went out and obviously brought back the first human beings it could find."

"No!" Miss Hedford cried weakly. "No! It's disgusting! We're not animals!"

She began to sob. McCoy, with Kirk's help, lifted her and put her on a cot, where McCoy gave her a shot. Gradually, her sobbing subsided.

"Bad," said McCoy. "Very bad."

"You can't do anything?"

"Keep her quiet. Keep secondary infections from developing. But the attrition rate of her red corpuscles is increasing. I can't stop it."

Kirk turned to Spock. "Mr Spock, the next time that thing appears, don't fail to get tricorder readings. Find us a weapon to use against that thing."

"Captain, I have already drawn certain tentative conclusions. Considering the anomalously small size of this planet, and the presence of the damping field Mr Cochrane mentioned, plus the Companion, leads me to believe that it was the moon of some larger body now destroyed, and was colonized by a highly advanced civilization."

"I agree," Cochrane said. "I've found some artifacts which suggest the same thing."

"The point, Spock?"

"One can deduce further that the Companion may be the last survivor of this long-dead culture. You ask me to find a weapon. Do you intend to destroy it?"

"I intend to do whatever is necessary to get us away from here and Commissioner Hedford to a hospital," Kirk said grimly. "If the Companion stands in the way, then we push it out of the way. Clear, Mr Spock?"

"Quite clear, Captain." Spock picked up his tricorder and left, heading for the shuttlecraft.

"Cochrane, if you left here, what would happen to you?"

"I'd start to age again, normally."

"You want to get away from here?"

"Believe me, Captain, immortality consists largely of boredom. Of course I do… what's it like out there? In the galaxy?"

"We're on a thousand planets, and spreading out We're crossing fantastic distances… and finding life everywhere. We estimate there are millions of planets with intelligent life. We haven't begun to map them." Cochrane's eyes were shining. "Interesting?"

"How would you like to go to sleep for a hundred and fifty years and wake up in a new world?"

"Good," Kirk said. "It's all out there, waiting for you. And you'll find your name honored there. But we'll probably need your help to get away."

"You've got it."

"All right. You seem to think this Companion can do almost anything."

"I don't know its limitations."

"Could it cure Commissioner Hedford?"

"I don't know."

"It's worth a try. We're helpless. You say you can communicate with it?"

"To a degree. It's on a non-verbal level, but I usually get my messages across."

"Try it now. See if it can do anything."

Cochrane nodded and stepped outside, followed by Kirk and McCoy. "How do you do it?" Kirk said.

"I just sort of… clear my mind. Then it comes. Better stay back."

Cochrane closed his eyes. A long moment passed, and then Kirk heard the melodic humming of the Companion. It appeared near Cochrane, shimmering, resplendent with a dozen beautiful colors, to the sound of faint bells. It moved to Cochrane, enveloped him, gathered around him, hovering. The lights played on Cochrane's face.

"What do you make of that, Bones?" Kirk said softly.

"Almost a symbiosis of some kind. A sort of joining."

"Just what I was thinking. Not exactly like a pet owner speaking to an affectionate animal, would you say?"

"No. More than that."

"I agree. Much more. Possibly… love."

Now the Companion was moving away from Cochrane, who was slowly returning to normal. The Companion faded away, and Cochrane shook his head and looked about as if to get his bearings. His eyes settled on Kirk.

"You all right?" Kirk said.

"Oh. Yes. I… it always kind of… drains me. But I'm all right."

"Well?"

Cochrane shook his head again. "The Companion can't do anything to help Miss Hedford. There seems to be some question of identity involved… I didn't understand it. But the answer is no, I'm sure of that."

"Then she'll die."

"Look, I'm sorry. If I could help you, I would. But the Companion won't."

It was several hours before Spock came back from the shuttlecraft. When he returned, he was carrying with him a small but complex black device, obviously in very rough form, as though it had been hastily put together by a gifted child. He took it into the house. "Your weapon, Captain."

"Oho. How does it work?"

"The Companion, as we already know, is mostly plasma—a state of matter characterized by a high degree of ionization. To put the matter simply, it is mostly electricity. I propose to, in effect, short it out. Put this in proximity to the Companion, throw this switch, and we will scramble every electrical impulse the creature can produce. It cannot fail."

Cochrane was staring unhappily at the device. Kirk said, "It troubles you, Cochrane?"

"The Companion saved my life. Took care of me for a hundred and fifty years. We've been… very close… in a way that's hard to explain. I suppose I even have a sort of affection for it."

"It's also keeping you a prisoner here."

"I don't want it killed."

Spock said, "We may simply render it powerless—"

"But you don't know!" Cochrane said intensely. "You could kill it! I won't stand for that, Kirk."

"We're getting away from here, Cochrane. Make up your mind to that."

"What kind of people are you nowadays?" Cochrane demanded. "Doesn't gratitude mean anything to you?"

"I've got a woman dying in here, Cochrane. I'll do anything I have to to save her life."

Cochrane stared at Kirk, and slowly the fight went out of him. "I suppose, from your point of view, you're right. I only…"

"We understand how you feel, Mr Cochrane," McCoy said. "But it has to be done."

"All right. You want me to call it, I suppose?"

"Please," Kirk said. "Outside."

McCoy remained with his patient. Spock hefted his device, and he and Kirk left the house. Already, Cochrane and the Companion were approaching each other. Soft lights and soft music came from the creature. It almost seemed to be purring.

"Is this close enough?" Kirk whispered.

"I think so," Spock whispered back. "But there is a certain risk. We do not know the extent of the creature's powers."

"Nor it ours. Now, Spock!"

Spock closed the switch. The blurring of the Companion abruptly increased, and a sharp high-pitched humming sound came from it, alarmed, strong. The pastel colors changed to somber blues and greens, and the hint of bells changed to a discordant clanging. Cochrane, only a few feet away from it, grasped his head and staggered, then fell. The evanescent, ever-changing, column of plasma swept down upon the house.

Kirk and Spock ducked inside, but there was no safety there. The room was filled with the whirling and clanging. With it, Kirk felt a terrible sense of pressure, all over his body. The breath was crushed out of him. He struck out, but there was nothing to strike at. Beside him, he was aware that Spock had dropped the device and was also gasping futilely for air.

"Stop it! Stop it!" McCoy's voice shouted, as if from a great distance. "It's killing them!"

Cochrane came in, and, immediately divining what was happening, went into the position of communion. The Companion's colors returned to the pastel, and the creature faded away. Kirk and Spock both fell to their knees, gulping in great gasps of air. McCoy knelt beside them; Cochrane went out again.

"Are you all right?" McCoy said. "Can you breathe?"

Kirk nodded. "All? right, Bones." He got shakily to his feet, followed by Spock, who also seemed to be regaining his strength rapidly. "Cochrane's got it off us. I don't know whether he did us a favor or not."

"What kind of talk is that?" McCoy said sharply.

"How do you fight a thing like that? I've got a ship somewhere out there… the responsibility for four lives here… and one of them dying."

"That's not your fault."

"I'm in command, Bones. That makes it my fault. Now I've had it. I can't destroy it. I can't force it to let us go."

After a moment McCoy said, "You're a soldier so often that maybe you forget you were also trained to be a diplomat. Why not try using a carrot instead of a stick?"

"But what could I offer… Hmmm. Maybe we can. Spock!"

"Yes, Captain."

"The universal translator on the shuttlecraft. We can try that. Talk to the thing."

"The translator is for use with more congruent life-forms."

"Adjust it. Change it. The trouble with immortality is that it's boring. Adjusting the translator would give you something to do."

"It's possible. If I could widen its pattern of reception—"

"Right down your alley, Mr Spock. Get it here and get to work."

The translator was small but intricate. Cochrane eyed it interestedly, while McCoy tended his patient. "How does that gadget work?" he said.

"There are certain universal ideas and concepts, common to all intelligent life," Kirk explained. "This device instantaneously compares the frequency of brainwave patterns, selects those it recognizes, and provides the necessary grammar and vocabulary."

"You mean the box speaks?"

"With the voice, or its approximation, of whatever creature is on the sending end. It's not perfect, of course, but it usually works well enough. Are you ready, Mr Spock?"

"Quite ready, Captain."

"Mr Cochrane, call the Companion, please."

Cochrane left the house, Kirk and Spock once more following, with the translator. And again the sound of the Companion preceded its appearance; then it was there, misty, enigmatic. Spock touched the translator and nodded to Kirk.

"Companion… we wish to talk to you."

There was a change in the sound. The Companion drew away from Cochrane. Then a voice came from the translator. It was soft, gentle—and unmistakably feminine.

"How can we communicate? My thoughts… you are hearing them. This is interesting."

"Feminine, Spock," Kirk said. "No doubt about it."

"Odd. The matter of gender could change the entire situation."

"Dr McCoy and I are way ahead of you, Mr Spock."

"Then it is not a zoo-keeper."

"No, Mr Spock. A lover… Companion! It is wrong to hold us here against our will."

"The man needs the company of his own kind, or he will cease to exist," the gentle voice said. "He felt it to me."

"One of us is about to cease to exist. She must be taken to a place where we can care for her."

"The man needs others of his species. That is why you are here. The man must continue."

"Captain, there is a peculiar, dispassionate logic here," Spock said. "Pragmatism unalloyed. From its words, I would say it will never understand our point of view."

"Maybe. Companion, try to understand. It is the nature of our species to be free, just as it is your nature to stay here. We will cease to exist in captivity."

"Your bodies have stopped their peculiar degeneration. You will continue without end. There will be sustenance. There will be nothing to harm you. You will continue and the man will continue. This is necessary."

"Captain!" Spock said. "This is a marvelous opportunity for us to add to our knowledge. Ask it about its nature, its history—"

"Mr Spock, this is no classroom. I'm trying to get us away from here."

"A chance like this may never come again. It could tell us so much—"

"Mr Spock, get lost. Companion, it is plain you do not understand us. This is because you are not of our species. Believe me, we do not lie. What you offer us is not continuation. It is non-existence. We will cease to exist. Even the man will cease to exist."

"Your impulses are illogical. This communication is useless. The Man must continue. Therefore, you will continue. It is necessary."

The voice fell silent. The Companion moved away. Slowly it started to grow fainter, and finally was not there at all.

Kirk's shoulders sagged, and he went back into the house, followed by Spock. Cochrane came in after them.

"Captain," he said, "why did you build that translator of yours with a feminine voice box?"

"We didn't," Kirk said.

"But I heard—"

"The ideas of male and female are universal constants, Cochrane. The Companion is definitely female."

"I don't understand."

"You don't?" said McCoy. "A blind man could see it with his cane. You're not a pet, Cochrane. Nor a specimen kept in a cage. You're a lover."

"I'm—what?"

"Isn't it evident?" Kirk said. "Everything she does is for you. Provides for you. Feeds you. Shelters you. Clothes you. Brings you companions when you're lonely."

"Her attitude, when she approaches you, is profoundly different from when she contacts us," Spock added. "In appearance, in sound, in method. Though I do not completely understand the emotion, it obviously exists. The Companion loves you."

Cochrane stared at them. "That's—that's ridiculous!"

"Not at all," Kirk said. "We've seen similar situations."

"But after a hundred and fifty years—"

"What happens when you communicate with it?" Spock said.

"Why, we sort of… it—it merges with my mind."

"Of course. It is nothing to be shocked by. A simple symbolic union of two minds."

"That's outrageous! Do you know what you're saying? No, you couldn't! But… all the years… letting something… as alien as that… into my mind, my feelings—" Suddenly Cochrane was furious as well as astonished. "It tricked me! It's some kind of an… emotional vampire! Crawling around inside me!"

"It didn't hurt you, did it?" Kirk said.

"Hurt me? What has that to do with it? You can be married to a woman you love for fifty years and still keep your private places in your mind. But this—this thing—fed on me!"

"An interesting attitude," Spock said. "Typical of your time, I should say, when humanity had much less contact with alien life-forms than at present."

"Don't sit there and calmly analyze a disgusting thing like this!" Cochrane exploded. "What kind of men are you, anyway?"

"There's nothing disgusting about it, Cochrane," McCoy said. "It's just one more life-form. You get used to these things."

"You turn my stomach! You're as bad as it is!"

"I fail to understand your highly emotional reaction," Spock said. "Your relationship with the Companion was, for a hundred and fifty years, emotionally satisfying, eminently practical, and totally harmless. It may, indeed, have been quite beneficial."

Cochrane glared at them. "So this is what the future looks like—men who don't have the slightest notion of decency or morality. Well, maybe I'm a hundred and fifty years out of style, but I'm not going to be fodder for some inhuman—monstrous—" Choking up, he swung on his heel and walked out.

"A most parochial attitude," Spock said.

"Doctor," Nancy Hedford's voice called weakly. "Doctor."

McCoy hurried to her, Kirk following. "Right here, Miss Hedford."

She managed a very faint, almost bitter laugh. "I… heard him. He was loved… and he resents it."

"You rest," McCoy said.

"No. I don't want? want to die… I've been… good at my job, Doctor. But I've… never been loved. What kind… of a life is that? Not to be loved… never… and now I'm dying. And he… runs away from love…"

She fell silent, gasping for breath. McCoy's eyes were grim.

"Captain," Spock called from the door. "Look out here."

Outside, the Companion was back, looking much the same as usual, but Cochrane was standing away from it, barely controlling himself, icily furious.

"Do you understand?" he was saying. "I don't want anything to do with you."

The Companion moved a little closer, chiming questioningly, insistently. Cochrane backed away.

"I said keep away! You'll never get close enough to trick me again! Stay away from me! I know you understand me! Stay away! Leave me alone, from now on!"

Shaken, white-faced and sweating, Cochrane came back to his house. Kirk turned back to McCoy. Nancy was lying quite still.

"Bones? Is it over?"

"No. But she's moribund. Respiration highly erratic. Blood pressure dropping. She'll be dead in ten minutes. And I—"

"You did everything you could, Bones."

"Are you sorry for her, Kirk?" Cochrane said, still in an icy rage. "Are you really feeling something? Don't bother. Because that's the only way any of us are going to get away from here. By dying!"

An idea, a forlorn hope, came to Kirk. He picked up the translator and went outside. The Companion was still there.

"Companion. Do you love the man?"

"I do not understand," said the feminine voice from the translator.

"Is he important to you—more important than anything? Is it as though he were part of you?"

"He is part of me. He must continue."

"But he will not continue. He will cease to exist. By your feeling for him you are condemning him to an existence he will find unbearable."

"He does not age. He remains forever."

"You refer to his body," said Kirk. "I speak of his spirit. Companion, inside the shelter a female of our species lies dying. She will not continue. That is what will happen to the man unless you release all of us."

"I do not understand."

"Our species can only survive when there are obstacles to overcome. You take away all obstacles. Without them to strengthen us, we weaken and die. You regard the man only as a toy. You only amuse yourself with him."

"You are wrong," said the translator. Was there urgency as well as protest in that voice?"The man is the center of all things. I care for him."

"But you can't really love him. You don't have the slightest knowledge of love—of the total union of two people. You are the Companion; he is the man; you are two different things, and can never join. You can never know love. You may keep him here forever, but you will always be separate, apart from him."

There was a long pause. Then the Companion said, "If I were human… there can be love…"

Then the creature faded from sight. Kirk went back into the shelter, almost bumping into McCoy, who had been standing behind him. "What did you hope to gain by that?" the surgeon said.

"Convince her of the hopelessness of it. The emotion of love frequently expresses itself in sacrifice. If love is what she feels, she might let him go."

"But she—or it—is inhuman, Captain," Spock said. "You cannot expect her to react like a human."

"I can try."

"It won't do any good," Cochrane said. "I know."

From the direction of the cot, a voice said, "Zefram Cochrane." It was Nancy's voice, clear and strong, but somehow as if the use of

human lips, tongue and vocal cords had become unfamiliar. They all spun around.

There stood Nancy Hedford—but transformed, radiant, soft, gentle, staring at Cochrane. The rosy glow of health was evident in her cheek. McCoy raised his medical tricorder and stared at it, thunderstruck, but Kirk had no need to ask what he saw. The Nancy Hedford who had been about to die was not sick at all now.

"Zefram Cochrane," she said. "We are understanding."

"It's—it's her!" Cochrane said. "Don't you understand? It's the Companion!"

"Yes," said Nancy. "We are here—those you knew as the Commissioner and the Companion. We are both here."

Spock said, "Companion, you do not have the power to create life."

"No. That is for the maker of all things."

"But Commissioner Hedford was dying."

"That part of us was too weak to hold on. In a moment there would have been no continuing. Now we are together. Now we understand that which you called love—both of us. It fills a great need. That we did not have, we now have."

"You mean—you're both there in one body?" Kirk said.

"We are one. There is so much hunger, so much wanting." She moved toward Cochrane, who retreated a step. "Poor Zefram Cochrane. We frighten you. We never frightened you before." Tears formed in her eyes. "Loneliness. This is loneliness. We know loneliness. What a bitter thing. Zefram Cochrane, how do you bear it?"

"How do you know what loneliness is?" Cochrane said.

"To wear this form is to discover pain." She extended a hand. "Let us touch you, Zefram Cochrane."

His hand slowly went out, and they touched.

Kirk turned his head and said in a low voice: "Spock. Check out the shuttlecraft. The engines, communication, everything."

"We hear you, Captain," Nancy said. "It is not necessary. Your vehicle will operate as before. So will your communications device."

"You're letting us go?" Cochrane said.

"We would do nothing to stop you. Captain, you said that we would not know love because we were not human. Now we are human, all human, and nothing more. We will know the change of the days. We will know death. But to touch the hand of the man—

nothing is as important. Is this happiness, Zefram Cochrane? When the sun is warmer? The air sweeter? The sounds of this place like gentle currents in the air?"

"You are very beautiful," Cochrane said in a low voice.

"Part of me understands. Part does not. But it pleases me."

"I could explain. Many things. It'll be an eye-opener to you." He was alive with excitement. "A thousand worlds, a thousand races. I'll show you everything—just as soon as I learn my way around again. Maybe I can make up for everything you did for me."

Sadness appeared in Nancy's eyes. "I cannot go with you, Zefram Cochrane."

Cochrane was stunned. "Of course you can. You have to."

"My life emanates from this place. If I leave it, for more than a tiny march of days, I will cease to exist. I must return, even as you must consume matter to maintain your life."

"But—you have powers—you can—"

"I have become almost as you. The march of days will affect me. But to leave here would mean a cessation of my existence."

"You mean you gave up everything to become human?"

"It is nothing… compared to the touch of you."

"But you'll age, like any other human. Eventually you'll die."

"The joy of this hour is enough. I am pleased."

"I can't fly off and leave you here," Cochrane said. "You saved my life. You took care of me and you loved me. I never understood, but I do now."

"You must be free, Zefram Cochrane."

Kirk said gently: "The *Galileo* is waiting, Mr Cochrane."

"But… If I take her away from here, she'll die. If I leave her… she's human. She'll die of loneliness. And that's not all. I love her. Is that surprising?"

"Not coming from a human being," Spock said. "You are, after all, essentially irrational."

Cochrane put his arms around her. "I can't leave her. And this isn't such a bad place. I'm used to it."

"Think it over, Mr Cochrane," Kirk said. "There's a galaxy out there, waiting to honor you."

"I have honors enough. She loves me."

"But you will age, both of you," Spock said. "There will be no more immortality. You will grow old here, and finally die."

"That's been happening to men and women for a long time… and I've got the feeling that it's one of the pleasanter things about being human—as long as you do it together."

"You're sure?" Kirk said.

"There's plenty of water. The climate is good for growing things. I might even try to plant a fig tree. Every man's entitled to that," isn't he?" He paused, then added soberly, "It isn't gratitude, Captain. Now that I see her, touch her, I know. I love her. We'll have a lot of years, and they'll be happy ones."

"Mr Cochrane, you may or may not be doing the right thing. But I wish you the best. Mr Spock, Bones, let's go."

As they turned, Cochrane said, "Captain."

"Yes?"

"Don't tell them about Cochrane. Let it go."

Kirk smiled. "Not a word, Mr Cochrane."

As they settled into the *Galileo,* Spock said, "I pose you an interesting question, Captain. Have we not aided in the commission of bigamy? After all, the Companion and Commissioner Hedford are now sharing the same body."

"Now you're being parochial, Mr Spock," McCoy said. "Bigamy is not everywhere illegal. Besides, Nancy Hedford was all but dead. Only the Companion is keeping her alive. If it withdrew, Nancy wouldn't last ten minutes. In fact, I'm going to report her dead as soon as we hit the *Enterprise.*"

"Besides, what difference does it make?" Kirk said. "Love was the one thing Nancy and the Companion wanted most. Now they have it."

"But not for eternity," McCoy said. "Only a lifetime."

"Yes. But that's enough, Bones. For humans."

"That's a very illogical remark, Jim." As Spock's eyebrows climbed, McCoy added, "However, it happens to be true."

Kirk grinned and raised his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.*"

The communicator fairly shouted back. "Captain! This is Scotty. Are you all right?"

"We're perfectly all right. Can you get a fix on us?"

"Computing now… yes, locked on."

"Very good. I'll continue transmission. Assume standard orbit on arrival. We'll transfer up on the shuttle-craft."

“But what happened, Captain?”

“Not very much, in the end,” Kirk said. “Only the oldest story in the world.”

FRIDAY'S CHILD

(D. C. Fontana)

Monday's child is fair of face.

Tuesday's child is full of grace.

Wednesday's child is loving and giving.

Thursday's child works hard for a living.

Friday's child is full of woe.

But the child that is born on the Sabbath Day

Is brave and bonny and good and gay.

(Harper's Weekly, 1887)

Even had Kirk not already known that Teer Akaar was High Chief of the ten tribes of Ceres, it would have been plain from the moment that he, Spock and McCoy materialized before the encampment that the Akaars were persons of consequence. Before each of the tents—which were on the edge of a brushy area—stood a pole bearing a family banner, and each of these was surmounted by another flag emblazoned with Akaar's tribal emblem, a flight of abstract birds.

A few tribesmen and women, wearing vividly colored robes cut in simple tunic style, stared in astonishment as the three from the *Enterprise* shimmered into existence out of nothing, and then silently ducked away into their own tents as another man stepped into view from the largest pavilion. This man's tunic was plain black, with the distinctive bird design embroidered on the shoulder. He seemed to be about forty-five, reed slim, tough as a leather quirt. Looking straight at Kirk, he put his right fist over his heart and then extended the hand out before him, palm up. The gesture was easy to read: *My heart and all that I own are open to you.*

"I am Maab, of the House of Akaar," he said. "Our tents are honored."

"You honor us," Kirk said. Thinking fast, he made a half-bow with both hands out before him, palms up, and then drew the hands to his chest. *Your hospitality is accepted with open heart.* It might not have been the right answer, but it seemed to do.

"The High Chief awaits your coming," Maab said, gesturing toward the tent and then leading the way. They were friendly toward the Federation, but Klingon ships had been reported in this sector, and though technically the Federation and the Empire were at peace, there had been an increase in the number of incidents in the past month. It was vital that the mission to Ceres not become an incident.

There were two men, as well as a woman, inside the tent, but Maab's full, deep bow of total subservience instantly made evident which man was Teer Akaar, a tall, broad-shouldered man in his late fifties, in a white robe with black birds. The ritual gestures were exchanged, and introductions made all around. Maab, it developed, was Teer Akaar's brother. The tall man in his late teens was Raal, the chief's son; and the kneeling young woman, who was quite lovely, was the chief's wife Eleen ("My second wife, and an honor to my house"). As Raal helped her to rise, it became clear that she was pregnant.

"Come," Akaar said, gesturing toward a table so low that it almost scraped the carpets. "I wish to hear your words about the rocks of the mountains."

Kirk motioned to Spock, who set upon the table several pieces of raw stone and the many-paged, pre-prepared formal agreement. They all sat down on cushions, except the woman, who retired to a curtained-off area, and Raal, who quietly left through the front entrance. It was getting dark outside.

"A geological survey," Kirk said, "has revealed that your world has valuable deposits of a mineral called topaline. I have been authorized to negotiate for Federation mining rights for this mineral."

"My people are herders and tradesmen, Captain," Akaar said. "We do not understand how a rock may be of value."

"You make your weapons of iron. You often trade in gold and silver."

"Iron has long been known to our weapons makers. Gold and silver came with Federation trade ships—they have little meaning to us. But they are metal, not rock such as this." He nudged the chunk of topaline ore.

"Chief Akaar, I trust you will bear with me for a long explanation. The Federation has hundreds of colonies which are

mining operations, and research projects, on planets and asteroids that normally could not maintain our life forms. As your own legends hint, you yourselves are descendants of an Earth colony. Those colonists named your planet after an asteroid in Earth's own solar system, a five-hundred-mile ball of rock that was the first asteroid to be colonized—though it hasn't even an atmosphere."

"Then how is this done?" Akaar said.

"We create artificial domes under which we maintain air we can breathe," Spock said. "Topaline contains minute quantities of a metal which is essential to such life-support systems. Not only is it rare, but it must be constantly replaced."

"Why?" Maab said. "Does it rust, or wear out?"

Spock was obviously starting to explain, but Kirk held up his hand. These people had utterly forgotten the technology which had brought them to this planet, centuries ago. Nothing short of a cram course in physics would make clear to them the concept of radioactive half-life.

"Something like that," Kirk said. "And the fact that there is so little of it even in topaline means that the ore has to be transported in bulk to special refining plants."

"Then clearly it is of enormous value," Maab said. "What then do you offer for it?"

"An honest price," Kirk said, "in whatever medium of exchange you favor."

Maab leaned forward. Suddenly, he looked angry. "You Earthmen," he said harshly, "come hiding your lies behind papers of promise. Then you steal?"

Akaar slammed a hand flat on the table top. "Maab!"

"They have cheated others," Maab said, staring hard at his brother. "We have heard. They have no honor…"

"You will be silent!"

"Nay, I will not. We are not of one mind on this. There are many who do not wish this treaty."

"Leave us. You cannot speak for the tribes."

Maab arose. "I will leave. But many are not as gullible as our High Chief. We will be heard."

He turned and strode out furiously, leaving behind a thick, heavy silence. Finally, Akaar stirred uncomfortably and said, "My brother dishonors me. Yet it may be said that your history gives him some reason to distrust you."

"Our ancient history, perhaps," Kirk said. "And perhaps dimly and inaccurately recalled."

"Certainly you have done us no wrong. But Maab has heard of other places and other peoples. He uses these to speak against you."

"How has he heard such stories?"

"By truth, I do not know," Akaar said. "Earth traders, perhaps. A few come for the wool of our *zakdirs.*"

"Then these are mere rumors, at best," Kirk said. "Our treaties are faithfully upheld."

"I take your word, Captain. I understand the things in this paper, and I will give it to the council of tribes this night. In the meantime, I bid you hang your weapons in my tent while you eat, and then rejoin us."

Kirk had known this was coming, for Spock had earlier made a most thorough study of the culture. But there was nothing that could be done about it. At a clap of Akaar's hands, a tribesman appeared, and the three men from the *Enterprise* handed over their phasers to him, and also their communicators, for to these herdsmen any machine seemed likely to be a weapon—especially if its custody was refused.

"I accept the guardianship of these weapons," Akaar said with singsong formality, "as an earnest of long peace between us. Keel, you will show these visitors to their tent, and have food brought them."

The meal was strange, but sumptuous, and served by a most scantily-clad Cerean girl of whom it was impossible not to be aware. Trying not to look pointedly the other way, McCoy said, "But I thought topaline deposits on Altimara would be sufficient for another two years."

"Altimara was a disappointment," Kirk said. "The two most promising veins petered out. They'll be able to maintain full supply for all colonies for six months. By then, the mining project here has to be in full operation."

"No reserves?"

Spock said, "There is a convoy of freighters on its way now from refineries on Lorigan to the colonies in this quadrant. But it will be the last; Lorigan has been shut down. Exhausted."

"Umph," McCoy said. "These endless mineralogical assignments are dull work. And Jim, this argument between Akaar and Maab—I don't like the feel of it."

"Nor I. But it's not our quarrel. We have to abide by the Council's ruling. Clearly Maab will have a strong voice in it. If he wins, well, maybe he has a price of his own."

"You'd deal with him?" McCoy said.

"I'm authorized to deal with whoever can give this planet's mining rights to the Federation," Kirk said quietly. "I am *not* authorized to take sides in any local struggle for power, Bones."

"In that connection," Spock said, picking up a slice of some pink fruit and eyeing it as it it were an unusually uninteresting insect, "I found it odd to see that two guards were placed in front of the High Chief's tent as soon as Keel led us away from it. In addition to the usual swords and knives, these carried the boomerang-like instrument these people call the *klugat.* Such an arsenal makes me wonder whether the guards were posted to defend Teer Akaar from attack—or from escaping."

Outside the tent there was a sudden shout, then another, and then the unmistakable clash of metal on metal.

"I think we're about to find out," Kirk said, springing up. All three dashed for the entrance.

They were met outside by three tribesmen, whose swords were instantly at their throats. The encampment was a bedlam. Akaar was in the center of a swirl of combat, defending himself like a hawk at bay. He was not alone, but his party was clearly outnumbered. His son was already dead. In the light of the campfire, Kirk could see that Maab was directing the attackers, and also prominent among them was Keel.

A *klugat* struck Akaar. He staggered, wounded in the side, blood flooding the side of his tunic. He had only two defenders left.

"Jim! We can't just…"

"Stand fast, Bones," Kirk said in an iron voice.

Akaar tried for his brother with one last thrust of his sword. Maab sidestepped it easily, and Akaar fell. His two last defenders, though apparently not seriously hurt, fell with him, kneeling before Maab in servile supplication.

The guards around Kirk's party prodded them forward. Maab waved Keel and another tribesman into what had been Akaar's pavilion. Then he smiled slightly at Kirk.

"You were wise not to try to interfere, Captain. This is none of your concern."

"We would have interfered if we could. We don't approve of murder."

"There has been no murder," Maab said stiffly. "We gave my brother an honorable death. This is revolution."

"I'm not interested in what you call it. However, you are not the man into whose custody we gave our equipment. I want it returned."

Maab's answer was predictable, but he did not have to give it, for at this moment Eleen stumbled out of the tent, herded at sword point by Keel and his fellow assassin. She was already frightened, but her fright became terror as she saw Akaar's body. Maab tripped her and simultaneously shoved her with the flat of his sword, so that she fell partly into the still red ashes of the campfire.

She screamed, half with pain and half with the doom of Maab's sword raised above her. Moving like lightning, Kirk slammed Maab aside, at the same time twisting his wrist in one of the very few directions the human wrist is not built to go; the sword fell. McCoy, only half a step behind, knelt beside Eleen; and with a smooth gesture, Spock scooped up the fallen sword.

Vulcans are tightly rational creatures, but in background they are a warrior race. Spock with a sword in his hand was a sight to give even a Cerean pause. They closed in with exaggerated caution.

And then, as McCoy lifted Eleen gently to examine her burned arm, all the Cereans gasped—and the woman herself, with an expression of loathing impossible to misinterpret, jerked herself free of the doctor's support.

"What's the matter with you, woman?" McCoy said sharply. "None of that, now. I'm only trying to help."

"And you have brought death upon yourself," Maab said slowly. "I would have let you go. But now…"

"You talk nonsense," Kirk said. "Killing an armed man who has a chance to defend himself is one thing. Murdering a defenseless woman is something else. She can't hurt you. You have the Chieftanship—you don't need her life."

"It is you who talk nonsense. Raal is dead, but this child that is to come is also of Akaar and still lives. It too must die before I may become chief—cleanly, by the sword. Moreover, Captain, by our law, only a husband may lay hands on his wife; for any other man, the penalty is death. I have not touched Eleen, nor would I have; but this your officer…"

"We're not governed by your law. Any charges against us will have to be brought before Starfleet Command, which will weigh them on their merits, one set of laws against the other."

"We know who would lose that judgment," Maab said. "On our world, our laws, and only our laws, prevail."

"Our ship will send a landing party to investigate our silence," Spock said, leveling the captured sword at the bridge of Maab's nose.

Maab did not flinch. "I think not," he said, with an odd, lopsided smile. "I think they will be too busy."

Kirk and Spock shot a swift glance at each other. Each knew precisely what the other was thinking. With that single, irresistible, and absolutely unnecessary brag, Maab had let slip the fact that there was more to this situation than simple tribal politics—a *lot* more.

Now had to come the hardest game of all: waiting in patience, even to the verge of death, to find out what it was.

In the guest tent, which was now their jail, Kirk, Spock and McCoy sat around the table where once they had been fed so sumptuously. Now two assassins were on guard inside the tent entrance. Eleen sat as far away from them all as she could, a light cloak over her tunic, but even more markedly huddled behind a wall of self-imposed isolation. Her arm had still not been tended; she had refused, and now she was refusing also to show any pain.

McCoy leaned his elbows on the table and looked unhappily at his colleagues. In a deliberate hash of English, Vulcan, Old High Martian, medical Latin and Greek, and Fortran—the language used to program very simple-minded computers—he said, "Maab still claims he would have let us go if it hadn't been for my laying hands on that poor girl. But now, apparently, we're sunk. Why do you suppose Scotty hasn't sent down a landing party?"

"By my calculation," Spock said, "it is an hour past the longest time Mr Scott would wait before taking action. No other conclusion is possible but that he has become engaged in some other duty which he considers more important, as Maab hinted."

Since the First Officer, picking up McCoy's clue, put out several words of this speech in the operative terms of the calculus of statement, he had to repeat it with these parts translated into Vegan before Kirk or McCoy could be sure of it; but once understood, there was no arguing

Kirk eyed everyone in the room with slow calculation.

Then he said, slowly and in Cerean, "Bones—I think you ought to do what you started out to do before. That girl's burned arm is still untended."

The guards stiffened.

"Might as well," McCoy said, also hi Cerean. "They can only kill me once for touching her, after all."

"Mr Spock, what is your advice?"

"I believe, Captain, that the risk is defensible."

Good; they understood each other. McCoy stood up. As his shadow fell across the girl, she looked up, and then pulled herself together. McCoy kneeled beside her.

"Your arm," he said, very gently.

"You will not touch me!"

The guards took a step forward. McCoy reached out. Eleen promptly turned into a scratching, biting wildcat. Somehow or other, it had occurred to none of them, in their swift and necessarily cryptic plotting, that she would also squeal. McCoy clamped a hand down hard over her mouth.

It was this, evidently, that made up the guards' minds. They lunged away from the entrance toward the struggle. Their backs were toward Kirk and Spock for perhaps three seconds. No more than three seconds later, they were decked.

While Spock disarmed the unconscious men, Kirk leaned over the girl, whom McCoy was still holding silent with grim difficulty.

"Listen, Eleen," Kirk said. "We're leaving. We can leave you behind, if that's what you want. Or you can cooperate and come with us. Maybe, just maybe, we can get you safely to our ship. We offer you the choice. Will you come with us?"

Cautiously, McCoy removed his hand from her mouth, ready to clamp it back down at the slightest intake of breath for a scream. But the girl only glared. At last she said, "I am dishonored. But I wish to live. I will come."

McCoy helped her up by the uninjured arm. She pulled away from him and stood immobile, not deigning to speak further, and waited while Spock distributed the guards' weapons to Kirk and McCoy, retaining a *klugat* for himself.

"Now," Kirk said, "let's get those phasers and communicators back."

This was not as easy in the doing as in the saying. Outside, the tribesmen were seated around the rebuilt campfire in an open

square, the open end of which was occupied solely by Maab, with Keel standing in the background. Kirk and Spock approached the back of Akaar's tent stealthily, slit the fabric, and slipped inside.

While they searched, they heard Maab's voice: "? Only the woman lives now. All know her. And it is not only the child that dooms her."

A general rumble of agreement.

Kirk threw back a carpet over a chest. There were the belts with the communicators still on them, but the phasers were gone. Somebody in this crowd, then, knew which was which—another oddity. He and Spock had just begun to look further when there was a mutter of movement and conversation outside, and a second later McCoy's head popped through the slit in the tent fabric.

"Jim," he whispered urgently. "The Council meeting's over. They're going to find out we're gone…"

As if in confirmation, there was a shout of alarm in the near distance.

The three men and Eleen stumbled through the scrub until the light from the fire and the torches was the dimmest possible glow in the distance before Kirk chanced calling a halt. Kneeling and motioning the others to cover—what there was of it in this brush—he snapped open his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise…* Kirk to *Enterprise…* Come in, Scotty… Kirk to *Enterprise…*"

There was no answer. Had the device been sabotaged? Kirk held out his hand for Spock's communicator, but that produced no better results.

"They are operative," said the First Officer. "It would appear that the *Enterprise* is simply out of range."

"Out of range?" McCoy said. "Where would they go?"

"The answer to that would involve a great deal of useless speculation on our part, Doctor, since we have no facts at hand. A better question is, what do we do until the ship returns?"

"No place can hide you from the *makeen,*" the woman said abruptly.

"What are they?" Kirk said. "Or it?"

"There are legends," Spock said, "of a guild of assassins among the Cerean tribes—a secret society, outside the law."

"They are not outside the law," Eleen said. "They are a part of our society. Certain deaths are always—necessary."

"Criminals like us?" Kirk said. "And 'traitors' like your husband? And you?"

"*Not* me," Eleen said. Her voice was angry, harsh, bitter. "It is because I bear Akaar's child. I did not want it. I would kill it myself, if that would save me."

McCoy took her by the wrist, and his own voice was just as angry. "You listen to me, Missy. You're not killing anything while I'm here to prevent it. We intend to keep both you *and* your baby alive, whether you want it or not. Hear me?"

She twisted herself free, her face contorted with anger and loathing. "You are heard. And I come with you because you will give me a few more hours to live. But in the end you will not escape the *makeen.*"

"Maybe not," Kirk said. "But we sure in blazes are going to try."

By the first wash of daybreak there were ample signs that they were being followed. Kirk was almost sorry to see the intimations of dawn, for at night he had at least been able to guess how far ahead they were of their pursuers by the distant sparks of torches.

The light found them in rocky country, the foothills of a mountain range. It was chill and desolate, even in the pale gold of early sunlight. The trail they were following seemed to wander aimlessly; Kirk could only hope that this was because it was following the contours of the land, rather than being simply an animal trail.

He and Spock led the way, with Eleen close behind. As bulky as her physical condition made her, she was surprisingly fresh and strong; McCoy, puffing along behind her, looked more the worse for wear than she did.

But the day grew hotter, the slopes steeper, the footing strewn with slippery shale and broken rock. At last Eleen stumbled and would have fallen had McCoy not caught her. She still had the energy to break free of him, however.

"Stay here with her and let her rest, Bones," Kirk said. "We're going to look around. While you're waiting, treat that arm—by force, if necessary."

He moved off with Spock. Shortly, they found the trail entering the narrow mouth of a steep defile. The slopes were shale-strewn and very high.

"Nice place to get trapped in," Kirk said.

"It has advantages as well, Captain. A defensible entrance, and walls that provide difficult access for attackers."

"That may be. At least there also seems to be a way out. If we could block this entrance, that would hold them up; they'd have to go around, over the hills."

Spock's eyebrows went up. He looked about speculatively. "The entrance is narrow enough, and there seems to be enough loose rock."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Do you remember our discussion of the kinds of weapons that might be made with a communicator in an emergency? In this instance, I think the device I called a 'sound bomb' might be in order." Kirk promptly handed Spock his communicator, but the First Officer shook his head. "Captain, it's only a chance. I would have to phase *two communicator signals into exact synchronization. We only have three. The odds…*"

"I'm not interested in the exact odds—only in lowering them. I'll go get McCoy's communicator."

He went back. He found Eleen's arm bandaged. He shook hands with himself at McCoy with approval, but McCoy was frowning.

"Jim, she says the baby isn't due until next week, but as far as I can tell with the few instruments I have, it's due *now.*"

"Oh, brrrotherrr. Well, you've doubtless delivered plenty of babies."

"Sure. But the Cereans have been away from Earth a long time, and they've developed some differences from the basic humanoid stock—a process called 'genetic drift' that's common in small, inbred populations. And if surgical intervention's necessary…"

"We may not live long enough to worry about it. Give me your communicator, Bones, and come along. We're planning a surprise."

Spock worked quickly, explaining to McCoy as he went along. "I have placed these so the sound beams they put out will meet and focus on a weak point, a potential slide area. The phased beams should set up a vibration in the rocks, *beneath* the loose material. There the rock is cohesive enough so that the vibration should build to the equivalent of explosive force."

"And the whole thing," Kirk said, "will end up in Maab's lap. We hope."

"Theoretically, if the loose rock does not slide away too soon and allow the sound energy to escape as heat. In either event it will destroy the communicators."

Kirk glanced back. Tiny figures were on the horizon. Their pace obviously had picked up. These tribesmen were like bloodhounds, and the track was fresh.

"Let's go." Kirk and Spock twisted the dials of the two communicators. The dull black little instruments each began to emit a hum which rose quickly in pitch to an earsplitting screech. Hastily, the party ran up the trail into the defile.

A glance back showed that their harriers were also running. The sound had located their quarry for them.

The rising sounds merged into one intolerable note. Eleen clutched at her head, then at her belly. McCoy grabbed her around the waist, kept her moving.

The screaming note was joined by a groaning rumble of rock shaking free of its moorings. Suddenly, the screaming wail was gone, leaving a silence which only seemed underlined by the moan of protesting rock.

Then came the explosion, the confined energy bursting out of the cliffside as though an actual charge had been planted there. The rocks crumbled and fell apart, their grumbling rising to a thunder as the shale and dirt smashed down the slope.

Maab, Keel and their party were almost in the defile. They looked up as the rock slide bore down on them. After a split second of frozen terror, they wheeled and scattered like a flight of pigeons. But some of them were caught, all the same.

And in the end, the entrance to the defile was gone. Instead, there was only a massive heap of shale, boulders and dirt.

"Very nice, Mr Spock," Kirk said, when he could hear again. "Now, we'd better push on. There's still the problem of food and water…"

"Not a chance, Jim," McCoy said. "We might carry Eleen—but not very far. She's started labor."

Since they had no choice, they did carry her out the other end of the defile; they did not want the *makeens* to return the favor by dropping rocks on them from above. At the exit, the country opened out a little, and off to the right some green shrub growth and contorted young trees indicated the possible presence of water.

Kirk looked up the slopes. A peculiar formation caught his eye: several huge boulders tumbled together, with a narrow, dark opening just visible between them. Kirk pointed.

"We might take shelter under those rocks. It's probably the best we can do on such short notice. Spock, stay here while we take her up and stand guard."

The First Officer nodded, and unhooking the *klugat* he had taken from the guard, twirled it experimentally.

The hole proved to be a genuine cave. The entrance was low, but inside the roof was high enough to permit them to stand erect. It was far from spacious, however. The walls were rough and pitted, and the floor sloped. Eleen lowered her bulky body and sat huddled in pain.

"Even eighteenth-century surgeons had more to work with than this," McCoy said, "but I guess beggars can't be choosers."

"We'll be outside if you need help."

"Don't make any rash offers."

Kirk went outside to find Spock experimenting with the *klugat.* "A most unusual weapon," the First Officer said. "Observe that the cutting edge is along the *inside.* If you throw it with a snap of the wrist, thus…"

The whirling knife spun in flight, its silver blades flashing. It sliced into a low bush and nearly cut it free of the ground before becoming entangled.

"And if you miss, it comes back to the owner," Spock said, retrieving the weapon. "A nice instance of economy."

"We'll need the economy. We've only got two. I'm more interested in those saplings. They look resilient. We might make bows and arrows—if we only had something to use for bowstrings."

"Hmm," Spock said. "A very pretty problem. I see nothing that would serve. But Captain, I suggest that an even more primitive weapon might serve our purposes: a throwing-stick."

"What in blazes is that?"

"It consists of a grooved handle with a cupped end. The arrow is fitted into the groove with the arrowhead toward the hand and the feathered end in the cup. You swing the throwing-stick overhand, and the arrow leaves it with considerable force, on the lever principle."

"There's plenty of flint here for arrowheads," Kirk said thoughtfully. "But we have nothing to use for feathers."

"True. However, if we notch the end of the arrow and tie on a length of rag, that may afford some stabilization, on the principle of a kite's tail. And may I point out, Captain, that the only missile

weapon possessed by the Cereans is this *klugat,* which has a range limit built into it by the very fact that it is designed to return to the thrower. Our arrows will fly somewhat farther—and will, of course, be quite unfamiliar to the Cereans. These advantages are small, but they may be all we have."

"You're right, Mr Spock. Let's get to work."

As they climbed toward the cave, a cry of pain came from it.

They were practicing with the throwing-sticks when McCoy at last appeared at the cave entrance, mopping his hands. "Come on in," he said.

Eleen lay in a shadowed corner. Her light cloak was her only bed; the lower half of her long tunic had been torn off to provide a blanket for the small bundle lying beside her. She propped herself up as the men entered, but made no protest as Kirk and Spock peered down at the bundle.

Tiny fists that resembled minute starfish wriggled aimlessly. The baby yawned into Kirk's face, seeming to suggest that the whole thing had been a snap, and all McCoy's worries had been needless.

"It seems a rather average specimen on the whole," Spock said.

"You think so, Spock?" McCoy said tiredly. "Well, look again. That is the High Chief of the ten tribes of Ceres."

He picked up the baby and put it in its mother's arms. The woman took it, passively, but she said, "I do not want it."

"He's your son," Kirk said.

"I did not wish it. It was good to become wife to Akaar. He was High Chief and had wealth. I thought because he was old and already had a son…"

"I don't care why you married Teer Akaar," Kirk interrupted harshly. "You did, and you bore his son, who is now the High Chief. You're bound by honor and position to care for him as long as you live. That's your tradition as well as ours, and I'll enforce it if I have to. Bones, how soon can she travel?"

"All these Cereans seem to have remarkable stamina, and I'd say this one is strong as an ox, even now. We might be able to move as soon as tomorrow."

"If so," Spock said, "I suggest that we climb the ridge behind us when we leave, and move cross-country. It will be difficult, but I believe safer."

Kirk thought about this. Maab might well have figured that they would follow the defile all the way, because of the woman. Or he might even already be moving in on them from the other end.

"Even odds," he said "We'll try it. But first, let's get some sleep. McCoy, you need the rest most; you'll stand last guard. I'll take the first."

He awoke to hear McCoy's voice calling his name and feeling his shoulder being shaken. As he sat up, McCoy was already leaving his side to rouse the sleeping Spock.

"Wake up, Spock. Jim, we're in more trouble. My, uh, patient has taken the child and gone."

"She got past *you?*" Kirk said.

"She struck me from behind with a rock. We've got to have more respect for the medical profession around here."

"How long has she been gone?"

"By the sun, I was out no more than half an hour. Her trail leads toward the defile exit. If Maab's men catch her…"

"I suggest," Spock said, "that henceforth we leave the matter to tribal justice, and devote ourselves to our own survival."

"Why, you ice-hearted, unfeeling…"

"The lady is *not* honorable, or charitable, or cooperative, or of much total worth," Spock said. "Even you can see that, Doctor."

"Yes? And what about the baby?"

"You both have a point," Kirk said. "Granted that the lady has few shining virtues. But the baby has done nothing but come into this world. I'd like to see him get a chance to grow up in it. Let's get going."

They moved cautiously along the defile, keeping as high up on the slopes as the footing would allow. At the exit, they came upon an astonishing scene.

The assassins, or all that had survived the rock slide, were all there, and so was Eleen. Most of the men were staring at her in amazement, and small wonder, for she was holding out the child to Maab.

"I have the child, Maab," she said, her voice distant but clear. "He is yours. Do as you will."

Keel and Maab looked at each other. At last Maab said, "Why?"

"I claim nothing but my life. Take the child, Maab—but let me go free. I care not for *him.*"

Finally Maab nodded. When he spoke, his voice was sarcastic. "It is much like you, Eleen. Come with us."

At this point, Kirk rose from cover and swung the throwing-stick, then fell flat again in the brush. No one saw him. The arrow cut through the air straight at Maab, its rag tail fluttering, and at the last minute veering and hitting another man in the leg. Evidently feathers were much better for arrows than tails were. The struck man fell, with a cry as much of surprise as of pain.

Everyone turned toward him. Spock popped up from behind a rock and threw, then also vanished. The arrow winged Keel; a red stain began to spread on his sleeve.

McCoy now appeared suddenly on the trail, just behind Eleen. Grabbing her from behind, he dragged her screaming to cover. The assassins were now beginning to realize what had happened, and made an abortive move after McCoy, but a scatter of arrows from Kirk and Spock threw them into confusion. The volume of fire was, tactically, not nearly great enough to produce such an effect; evidently Spock's guess about the effect on morale of the unfamiliarity of the weapons had been correct.

"Bones, get out of there!" Kirk shouted. "General retreat!"

He ducked as Keel threw a *klugat* at him. The vicious scything blades slashed the air whisperingly over his head. Below, McCoy, dragging Eleen, made his way up the slope from cover to cover. Kirk slipped to another rock, rose, and threw again, and this time was rewarded with a full-throated scream. He was getting the hang of the thing.

They moved backward slowly, covering for Eleen, hampered by the baby. As they went, Spock picked up the *klugat* Keel had thrown, which had been blocked from boomeranging by a boulder. Oddly, the *makeen* were no longer following.

Back inside the more defensible defile walls, the *Enterprise* men paused to assess the situation. They were nicely trapped—and the arrows were running out.

"What did you think you were going to do?" McCoy said, glaring at Eleen.

"You heard," she said coldly. "I would trade my life. Maab will let me go—to get the child."

"Oh? Aren't you overlooking something? We were close enough behind you to surprise Maab. It might even have looked to him like

you were bait for a trap. He won't trust you again, Missy—if he ever did. He'll kill you both, just to be sure."

"And of what use was this grand surprise?" the woman said with contempt. "Here he can simply starve us out."

As Kirk digested the truth of that, Maab's voice rang out.

"Captain!"

"What is it?"

Maab came forward, slowly, accompanied by two henchmen. The other assassins followed, stopping just out of arrow range. They learn fast, Kirk thought ruefully.

"A fine fight, Captain. And fought with much ingenuity. But useless, as you can see. I suggest that you put down your weapons now."

Clearly, there was no choice. "Do as he says, Doctor, Mr Spock," Kirk said quietly. "It appears that the cavalry doesn't come over the hill any more."

Eleen pushed forward, the child held out in her arms. "Take him, Maab. He is all that prevents your true Chieftanship."

Maab signaled to a henchman, who came forward and took the child.

"I will go now," Eleen said, hopefully.

"No," Maab said. "You stand condemned for other treasons. You know the penalty for unfaithfulness."

The woman backed away in terror. "No, no! I was not unfaithful —there was no one…"

"There is proof," Maab said heavily. "Keel saw it done, though he did not name the man before he was slain by this alien Captain's arrow. My brother may be dead, but his honor is my honor. Let justice be done!"

"No! No!"

Eleen began to run. The *makeen* silently cleared for her what seemed to be an avenue of escape. Then a *klugat* whirled through the air. She fell, and was still.

Maab looked sharply at Kirk. "You do not protest as before."

"Your justice is served," Kirk said, fighting down his nausea. "Perhaps it was merited. But the child is a different matter. He has harmed no one."

"He lives. The High Chieftanship must be mine."

"Why? Clearly you have only sown the seeds of still more factionalism, still more assassination. What do you really gain in

the end, Maab? And who else gains with you?"

"You are a clever man, Captain," Maab said reflectively. "You see beneath surfaces. Well, you are not the only ones who wish this rock in our hills. The Klingon Empire offered my brother much for mining rights. Wealth, power, a seat in their Empire. The fool chose to honor a promise made to your Federation. He did not trust the Klingons."

"But you did."

"I had to be Chief to give them what they wanted. A Klingon ship drew yours away so your men could not stop Akaar's death. You could have returned without harm if you had not broken taboo to save Eleen. She was not worth your deaths."

"She was," McCoy said, "then."

"Because of the child within her? But both die in the end. All this that followed was fruitless."

"One thing, then," McCoy said. "Let me have the boy I brought into the world. If you're going to take us out of it, I'd rather have him with me."

Maab shrugged and signaled to his henchman, who paused and then passed the child to McCoy. The remaining assassins raised their *klugats.* The resemblance to a firing squad was inarguable…

"Drop those weapons!"

The voice—Scott's voice—came from the lip of the cliff. With him was Sulu and a crewman. At the edge of the other side of the defile were Frost and two more crewmen—all with phasers at the ready.

"What the devil?" McCoy said.

"I would say, Doctor," Spock said, "that the cavalry has just come over the hill."

The crewmen came down, herding the assassins together. "But *how?*" Maab said. "How did you escape the Klingon ship? They were not to let you through until I signaled…"

"They backed off and ran when we came straight at them," Sulu said with a grin. "At first they decoyed us away with false distress calls, but when we saw through that and went right down their throats—well, their ships have speed, I'll grant them that."

Scott added, "I didn't think the Klingons were ready for a war, even to please this gentleman. Not even for topaline mining rights."

"Mr Scott," Kirk said, "I know you for a resourceful man, but how did you find us out here?"

"When we beamed down to the main camp, we found what had happened. A lot of Akaar's followers are left; only the assassins of Maab's group went hunting you. They told us you'd escaped to the hills, we used our sensors to pinpoint you, and beamed down again. 'Twas a near squeak."

Abruptly, there was movement behind Maab and a knife flashed. Maab gasped and fell. His killer stolidly wiped the knife on the sleeve of his tunic and held it out to a stunned Kirk.

"For treason to Akaar," the man said, "and for treason with the Klingons. I now stand ready for justice."

"And who in blazes may you be?" Kirk demanded. "I," the man said, "am the father of the High Chief born of Eleen."

The treaty was signed, by the father, who after a long tribal parley had been named the High Chief's guardian-regent. What complicated tribal politics and concepts of justice produced this result, Kirk could not fathom, nor did he care any longer. It was enough for him that the man had bound himself to serve the child until it came of age.

The last surprise was the naming of the High Chief. The father dubbed him, Leonard James Akaar.

It was Spock's opinion that McCoy and the Captain were going to be insufferably pleased with themselves, about that for at least a month.

WHO MOURNS FOR ADONAIS?

(Gilbert A. Ralston and Gene L. Coon)

All heads in the *Enterprise* bridge turned as the elevator door opened.

Kirk made a bet with himself: it was Lieutenant Carolyn Palamas with her report on those marblelike fragments they'd beamed up from the dead planet in the Cecrops cluster. He won the bet. She handed him some stapled sheets and he said, "Thank you," his eyes carefully averted from the girl's lustrous slate-gray ones.

Supreme beauty, he'd decided, could be a cruel liability to a woman. The stares it attracted set her apart. And he didn't want Carolyn Palamas to feel set apart. If she was the owner of copper-glorious hair and those slate-gray eyes, she was also a new member of his crew and a highly competent archeologist. She'd been stopping traffic since the day she was born. Well, he wasn't adding his gapes to the quota. He said, "Continue with standard procedures for Pollux Four, Lieutenant."

Dr McCoy appeared to share his defensiveness toward the traffic-stopper. "You look tired, Carolyn," he said.

"I worked all night on my report," she said.

"There's nothing like a cup of coffee to buck you up," Scott said. "Want to join me in one, Carolyn?"

She smiled at him. "Just let me get my chemicals back into the lab cabinet first." She left the bridge and Kirk said, "Could you get that excited over a cup of coffee, Bones?"

"I'm in love with her," Scott said briefly. As he hastened after her, a slight frown pulled at McCoy's brows. "I'm wondering about that, Jim."

"Scotty's a good man," Kirk said.

"He thinks he's the right man for her, but *she*—" McCoy shrugged. "Emotional analysis of this love goddess of ours shows up strong drives for wifehood and motherhood. She's all woman, Jim. One of these days the bug will find her and off she'll go—out of the Service."

"I'd hate to lose a good officer, but I never fight nature, Bones."

Chekov spoke from his station near Kirk's command chair. "Entering standard orbit around Pollux Four, sir."

On the screen Pollux Four had already appeared, not unearthlike. Continents, seas, clouds.

"Preliminary reports, Mr Spock?"

"Class M, Captain." Spock didn't turn from his mounded computer. Kirk, his eyes on the screen, saw the planet, rotating slowly, come into closer focus. He heard Spock say, "Nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, sir. Sensor readings indicate no life-forms. Approximate age four billion years. I judge no reason for contact. In all respects quite ordinary."

Kirk pushed a button. "Cartographic section, implement standard orders. All scanners automatic. All—"

"Captain!" shouted Sulu. "On scanner twelve!"

Something had suddenly come between them and the planet—something formless and so transparent Kirk could see the stars through it. It was rapidly growing in size.

"What in the name of…" McCoy fell silent.

"Mr Sulu," Chekov said, "am I seeing things?"

"Not unless I am, too," Sulu said. "Captain, that thing is a giant hand!"

Kirk didn't speak. On the screen the amorphous mass had begun to differentiate itself into five gigantic fingers, into a palm, the hint of a massive wrist extending down and out of the viewer's area. "Readings, Mr Spock." His voice was toneless. "Is it a hand?"

"No, Captain. Not living tissue."

"A trick then? A magnified projection?"

"Not a projection, sir. A field of energy."

"Hard about!" Kirk ordered briskly. "Course 230 mark 41."

The palm now dominated the screen, its lines deeply shadowed valleys, the huge, contrasting mounds of its construction simulating the human-size mounds of a human palm. The valleyed lines deepened, moving—and Chekov cried, "It means to grab us!"

For the first time Spock turned from his computer to look at the viewer. "Captain, if it's a force field—"

"All engines reverse!" Kirk shouted.

Lights flickered. Shudders shook the starship. Strained metal screamed. Bridge seats tumbled their occupants to the floor. Scrambling up to wrestle with his console, Sulu grasped it with

both hands as he fought to pull it backward. “The helm won’t answer, Captain! We can’t move!”

Scott had rushed in from the elevator; and Kirk, regaining his chair, addressed Uhura. “Lieutenant, relay our position and circumstances to Star Base Twelve immediately. Report that the *Enterprise* has been stopped in space by an unknown force of some kind.” He swung his chair around to Sulu. “Mr Sulu, try rocking the ship. Full impulse forward, *then* back.”

“Damage report coming in, Captain,” said Uhura. “Situation under control. Minor damage stations three, seven and nineteen.”

“Mr Sulu?”

“Applying thrust, sir.”

The ship vibrated. “No results, Captain. We’re stuck tight.”

Kirk glanced at the screen. The palm still owned it; and stars still shone through it. He looked away from it. “Status, Mr Spock?”

“The ship is almost totally encircled by a force field, sir. It resembles a conventional force field but of unusual wavelengths. Despite its likeness to a human appendage, it is not living tissue. It is energy.”

“Thank you, Mr Spock. Forward tractor beams, Mr Sulu—and adjust to repel.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Activate now!”

The ship quivered, groaning. “Ineffective, sir,” Sulu said. “There doesn’t seem to be anything to push against.”

Spock spoke. “I suggest we throw scanner twelve on the main viewing screen, Captain.”

“Do so, Mr Spock.”

The palm slid away. In its place, nebulous, still transparent, the features of a great face were shaping themselves into form on the screen. Silence was absolute in the bridge of the *Enterprise.* The immense face could be seen now, whole. But its immensity struck Kirk as irrelevant. It was an intensely masculine face; and whomever it belonged to was the handsomest male Kirk had ever seen in his life. The dark eyes were fixed on the ship. Diademed with stars, the brow, the nose and mouth conformed to convey an impression of classic beauty, ageless as the stars.

The voice that came from the screen suited the face.

“The aeons have passed, and what has been written has come about. You are welcome here, my beloved children. Your home awaits you.”

Kirk shook his head as though to clear his ears of the deep organ tones reverberating through the bridge. He tore his gaze from the screen to address Uhura. "Response frequencies, Lieutenant."

"Calculated, sir. Channel open."

He pulled the mike to him. "This is Captain James T. Kirk of the U*SS Enterprise.* Please identify yourself."

The request was ignored. "You have left your plains and valleys to make this bold venture," said the voice. "So it was from the beginning. We shall remember together. We shall drink the sacramental wine. The pipes shall call again from the woodlands. The long wait is ended."

The words had the sound of an incantation. Kirk said, "Whatever you are, whoever you are, are you responsible for stopping my ship?"

"I have caused the wind to withdraw from your sails."

"Return it," Kirk said. "Then well talk. You seem unwilling to identify yourself, but I warn you we have the power to defend ourselves. If you value your safety, release this ship!"

The lips moved in an approving smile. "You have the old fire. How like your fathers you are. Agamemnon… Achilles… Trojan Hector…"

"Never mind the history lesson. Release this ship or I'll—"

The smile faded. "You will obey—lest I close my hand—thus—"

The ship rocked like a toy shaken by a petulant child.

"External pressure building up, Captain," Scott called from his station. "Eight hundred GSC and mounting."

"Compensate, Mr Scott."

"Pressure becoming critical, sir. One thousand GSC. We can't take it."

Savagely Kirk swung around to the screen. "All right, whatever you're doing, you win. Turn it off."

"That was your first lesson. Remember it," the voice said. The sternness on its face was replaced by a smile radiant as sunlight. "I invite you and all your officers to join me, Captain. Don't bring the one with the pointed ears. Pan is a bore. He always was."

Kirk said hastily, "Take it easy, Mr Spock. We don't know what we're up against."

"Hasten, children," urged the voice. "Let your hearts prepare to sing."

"Well, Bones, ready for the concert?"

"Is that wise, Jim?"

"It is if we want a ship instead of a crushed eggshell."

Kirk got up to join his First Officer at the computer station. "You're in command, Mr Spock. Get all labs working on the nature of the force holding us here. Find a way to break clear."

"Acknowledged, sir. Beam-down?"

"Yes, Mr Spock."

The party materialized among olive trees. Ahead of them on a grassy knoll stood a small edifice of veinless marble. It was fronted by six fluted columns of the stone, lifting to capitals that flowered into graceful curves. Above them rose the white temple's architrave, embossed with sculptured figures. They looked ancient but somehow familiar. A semi-circled flight of steps led upward and into the structure.

As Chekov and Scott moved into position beside him, Kirk said, "Maintain readings on tricorders. That goes for everybody."

Behind him, unusually pale, Carolyn Palamas edged nearer to McCoy. "What am *I* doing here, Doctor?"

Unslinging his tricorder, McCoy said, "You're the student of ancient civilizations. This seems to be one. We'll need all the information you've got about it." He moved on to follow Kirk, adding, "The Captain will want us with him when he enters that door."

There was no door. They found themselves at once in a peristylelike open space. At its far end a dais made a pediment for a carved throne of the same spotless marble. There were benches of marble, a table that held a simple repast of fruit and wine, From somewhere came the sound of pipes, sweet, wild, pagan. On a bench beside the table sat a man-size being. Kirk had seen some good-looking men in his life, but this male, human or non-human, was in a class of his own. His face held the same agelessly classic beauty as the huge image of the *Enterprise* screen. A thigh-length garment was clasped to his sun-browned, smoothly muscular shoulders. Beside him lay a lyre. He rose to his tall six-foot two-inch height and walked to meet them.

"My children, greetings. Long, long have I waited for this moment."

His youth should have made the term "children" absurd. It didn't. He could get away with it, Kirk thought, because of the dignity. The whole bearing of, the creature exuded it.

Low-voiced, he said, "Bones, aim your tricorder at him."

"Ah, the memories you bring of our lush and beautiful Earth!" The being flung up his arms as though invoking the memories. "Its green meadows… its blue skies… the simple shepherds and their flocks on the hills…"

"You know Earth?" Kirk asked. "You've been there?"

The white teeth flashed in the radiant smile. "Once I stretched out my hand—and the Earth trembled. I breathed upon it—and spring returned."

"You mentioned Achilles," Kirk said. "How do you know about him?"

"Search back into your most distant memories, those of the thousands of years that have passed… and I am there. Your fathers knew me and your fathers' fathers. I am Apollo."

It was insanely credible. The temple… the lyre. Apollo had been the patron god of music. And the speech of this being was marked by an antique cadence, an almost superhuman assurance. There was also his incomparable symmetry of body and gesture.

Chekov broke the spell. "Yes," he said, "and I am the Czar of all the Russias!"

"Mr Chekov!"

"Sorry, Captain. I never met a god before."

"And you haven't now," Kirk said. "Your readings, Bones?"

"A simple humanoid. Nothing special."

"You have the manners of a satyr. You will learn." The remark was made abstractedly. The dark eyes had fixed on Carolyn Palamas. The creature stepped forward to lift her chin with his hand. Scott bristled and Kirk said, "Hold it, Scotty."

"Earth—she always was the mother of beautiful women. That at least is unchanged. I am pleased. Yes, we gods knew your Earth well… Zeus, my sister Artemis, Athene. Five thousand years ago we knew it well."

"All right," Kirk said. "We're here. Now let's talk. Apparently, you're all alone. Maybe we can do something to help you."

"Help me? *You?* You will not help me. You will not leave this place." The tone was final. "Your transportation device no longer functions."

Kirk flipped open his communicator. There was no responding crackle. The being said casually, "Nor will that device work either, Captain." He paused. Just as casually, he added, "You are here to worship me as your fathers worshipped me before you."

"If you wish to play god by calling yourself Apollo, that is your business," Kirk said. "But you are not a god to us."

"I said," repeated the humanoid, "you shall worship me."

"*You've* got a lot to learn, my friend," Kirk retorted.

"And so have you! Let the lesson begin!"

Before Kirk's unbelieving eyes, the body of the man-size being began to rise, taller, taller, taller. He towered twelve feet above them—and still grew higher. He was now a good eighteen feet in stature, a colossus of mingled beauty and rage. As the black brows drew together in fury, there came a deafening crash of thunder. The translucent light in the temple went dim, streaks of lightning piercing its darkness. Thunder rolled again. Around the temple's columned walls far above him, Kirk could see that lightning spears were gathering about the great head in a dazzling nimbus of flame.

Crowned with fire, Apollo said, "Welcome to Olympus, Captain Kirk!"

Dazed, the *Enterprise* commander fought against the evidence of his senses. His reason denied the divinity of the being; but his eyes, *his* ears, insisted on its truth. Then he saw that a look of weariness, of pain, had appeared on Apollo's face. The massive shoulders sagged. He vanished.

It was McCoy who spoke first. "To coin a phrase—fascinating."

Kirk turned to the girl. "Lieutenant Palamas, what do you know about Apollo?"

She stared at him unseeingly. "What?… oh, Apollo.He—he was the son of Zeus and Latona… a mortal woman. He was the god of light, of music, of archery. He—he controlled prophecy."

"And this creature?"

She had collected herself. "Clearly he has some knowledge of Earth, sir. His classic references, the way he speaks, his—his looks. They resemble certain museum sculptures of the god."

"Bones?"

"I can't say much till I've checked out these readings. He looks human, but of course that doesn't mean a thing."

"Whatever he is, he seems to control a remarkable technology," Chekov said.

"Power is what the thing controls," Scott said. "You can't pull off these tricks without power."

"Fine. But what power? Where does it come from?" Kirk's voice was impatient. "Scout around with your tricorders and see if you can locate his power source."

Scott and Chekov moved off and Kirk, his face grown thoughtful, turned to McCoy. "I wonder if five thousand years ago a race of—"

"You have a theory, Jim?"

"I'm considering one. What if—"

"Jim, look!"

Man-size again, Apollo was sitting on his marble throne.

"Come to me," he said.

They obeyed. Kirk spoke. "Mister—" he began. He hesitated, then plunged. "Apollo, would you kindly tell us what you want from us? Omitting, if you please, all Olympian comments?"

"I want from you what is rightfully mine. Your loyalty, your tribute and your worship."

"What do you offer in exchange?"

The dark eyes brooded on Kirk's. "I offer you human life as simple and pleasureful as it was those thousands of years ago on our beautiful Earth so far away."

"We're not in the habit of bending our knees to everyone we meet with a bag of tricks."

"Agamemnon was one such as you. And Hercules. Pride, hubris." The deep voice was somber with memory. "They defied me, too—until they felt my wrath."

Scott had rejoined Kirk in time to hear this last exchange. "We are capable of some wrath ourselves," he said hotly.

"I have four hundred and thirty people on my ship up there," Kirk said, "and they—"

"They are mine," said Apollo. "To cherish or destroy. At my will."

Carolyn suddenly broke in. "But why? What you've said makes no sense."

The dark eyes veered from Kirk's to linger on the cloud of copper-glorious hair. "What is your name?"

"Lieutenant Palamas."

"I mean your *name.*"

She glanced at Kirk as though for help. "Carolyn."

"Yes." Apollo leaned forward on the throne. "When she gave you beauty, Aphrodite was feeling unusually generous. I have a thousand tales to tell you. We shall speak together, you and I, of valor and of love."

"Let her alone!" Scott cried.

"You protest?" Apollo was amused. "You risk much, mortal."

Scott whipped out his phaser. "And so do you!"

With a lithe movement, Apollo was on his feet. He extended a finger at the phaser. A blue-hot flame leaped from it—and Scott yelled in pain. He dropped the weapon, recoiling.

Kirk bent to pick it up, but Chekov had already retrieved it The phaser was a lump of melted metal. Chekov handed it to Kirk. It was still hot to the touch.

"Quite impressive." The respect in Kirk's voice was genuine. "Did you generate that force internally?"

"Captain!" shouted Chekov. "The phasers—all of them!"

Kirk withdrew his from his belt. It had been fused into the same mass of useless metal.

"None of your toys will function."

Apollo dismissed the subject of the ruined phasers by stepping from his white throne. He strode over to Carolyn to search the slate-gray eyes with his. "Yes," he said, "the Cyprian was unusually generous to you. But the bow arm should be bare…"

He touched her uniform. Its stuff thinned into soft golden folds. They lengthened to her feet. She was gowned in a robe of flowing archaic Greek design that left one white shoulder naked. Golden sandals had replaced her shoes. Wonderingly, she whispered, "It—it is beautiful."

"You are beautiful," he said. "Come."

"She's not going with you!" Scott shouted. He took an angry step toward them—and was slammed against a marble bench. McCoy ran to him.

"That mortal must learn the discipline of my temple," Apollo said. "So must you all." He had Carolyn's hand in his. "But you—you come with me."

Kirk made a move and the girl shook her head. "It's all right, Captain."

The sunlight smile was for her. "Good," Apollo said. "Without fear. You are fit." A radiance suddenly enveloped them. Their figures were absorbed by it. They disappeared.

McCoy called to Kirk. "Scotty's stunned. He'll come around. But the girl, Jim—I'm not sure at all it was wise to let her go off like that. Whatever this Apollo is, we'd better be careful in dealing with him."

"He'd have been hard to stop," Kirk said. "Scotty tried."

"It's his moods that worry me. You've seen how capricious he is. Benevolent one moment, angry the next. If she says one displeasing thing to him, he could kill her."

"Yes, he could." Kirk turned to Chekov. "Mr Chekov, continue your investigations. You all right, Scotty?"

Leaning against McCoy's shoulder, the engineer shook his head dazedly. "I don't know. I'm tingling all over… a kind of inside burning. Did he take her with him?"

"So it would seem, Scotty."

"Captain, we've got to stop him! He wants her! The way he looks at her—"

"Mr Scott, the Lieutenant volunteered to go with him, hopefully to find out more about him. I understand your concern—but she's doing her job. It's time you started doing yours. We've got to locate the source of his power. You have a tricorder. Use it. One thing more. I want no more unauthorized action taken against him. I don't want you killed. That's an order."

Sullenly Scott stumbled away after Chekov and McCoy said, "Scotty doesn't believe in gods, Jim."

"Apollo could have been one though—once."

"Is *that* your theory?"

"Bones, suppose a highly sophisticated group of humans achieved space travel five thousand years ago. Suppose they landed on Earth near the area around the Aegean Sea. To the simple shepherds and tribesmen of primitive Greece wouldn't they have seemed to be gods? Especially if they were able to alter their shapes at will and command great energy?"

McCoy stared. Then he nodded soberly. "Like humans, occasionally benevolent, occasionally vindictive. Maybe you've got something. But I certainly wish that love-goddess girl were safely back on the *Enterprise.*"

Under the golden sandals of the love-goddess girl, the grass of the olive-groved glade was soft. "A simple humanoid" was how Dr McCoy had defined the man who strolled beside her. Birds

threaded the air she breathed with melody. Her hand felt very small in his. He lifted it to his lips—and they were as warm as human lips. Above the bird song, she could hear the plashing of a waterfall. Vaguely Carolyn Palamas thought, "I am both afraid and not afraid. How is it possible to feel two such different feelings at once?"

"I have known other women," he said. "Mortals… Daphne, Cassandra. None were so lovely as you. You fear me?"

"I—don't know. It isn't every day a girl is flattered by—"

"A god? I do not flatter."

She reached for another subject. "How do you know so much of Earth?"

"How do you remember *your* home? Earth was so dear to us, it remains forever a shrine. There were laughter, brave and goodly company—love."

"You are alone, so alone," she said. "The others—where are they? Hera, Hermes, your sister Artemis?"

"They returned to the stars on the wings of the wind," he said.

"You mean they died?"

"No. We gods are immortal. It was the Earth that died. Your fathers turned away from us until we were only memories. A god cannot survive as a memory. We need awe, worship. We need love."

"You really consider yourself to be a god?"

He laughed. "It's a habit one gets into. But in a real sense we were gods. The power of life and death was ours. When men turned from us, we could have struck down from Olympus and destroyed them. But we had no wish to destroy. So we came back to the stars again."

A note of infinite sadness entered his voice. "But those we had to leave behind, those who had loved us were gone. Here was an empty place without worship, without love. We waited, all of us, through the endless centuries."

"But you said the others didn't die."

"Hera went first. She stood before the temple and spread herself upon the wind in a way we have… thinner and thinner until only the wind remained. Even for gods there is a point of no return." He paused. Then he turned her around to face him.

"Now you have come," he said.

A breeze stirred the grass at her feet. The urgency in his eyes was familiar to the traffic-stopper. But in his it seemed uniquely

moving. Abruptly she had a sense of imminent glory or catastrophe.

"I knew you would come to the stars one day. Of all the gods, I knew. I am the one who waited. I have waited for you to come and sit by my side in the temple. Why have you been so long? It has been… so lonely."

She didn't speak. "Zeus," he said, "took Latona, my mother. She was a mortal like you. He took her to care for, to guard, to love—thus…"

His arms were around her. She whispered, "No—no, please, not now. I—I feel you are most kind and your—your loneliness is a pain in my heart. But I don't know. I——"

"I have waited five thousand years."

He kissed her. She pulled back; and he released her at once. "I will leave you for a little to compose yourself. The temple is not far." He stooped to brush the burnished hair with his lips before turning to stride up the swell of the glade. She watched him go. A sob broke from her; and she covered her face with her hands. Glory—or catastrophe. Who could know which lay in wait? The bird song had sunk into silence and shadows were lengthening through the leaves of the olive trees. She waited another moment before she climbed the gladed upswell that led back to the temple.

The *Enterprise* party was quartering the area before it with tricorders. As she emerged from the trees, Chekov was calling to Kirk. "There's a repeated occurrence of registrations, Captain. A regularly pulsating pattern of radiated energy."

She was glad Scott's attention was fixed on the ground. "I can detect the energy pattern, too, Captain. But I can't focus on it."

"Apollo seems able to focus on it, Mr Scott. He taps that power. How?"

"The electric eel can generate and control energy without harm to itself," Chekov said. "And the dry-worm of Antos—"

"Not the whole encyclopedia, please," McCoy begged.

"The Captain asked for complete information," Chekov said stiffly.

"Jim, Spock is contaminating this boy."

"Mr Chekov, what you're suggesting is that Apollo taps a flow of energy he discharges through his own body," Kirk said.

"That would seem to be most likely, sir."

"But we don't *know* where the energy comes from! That's what we've got to find out if we're to cut off its source!"

"Number one on our 'things to do'," murmured McCoy.

"Is that all you can offer, Bones?"

"Yes, except for this finding. Your Apollo's got an extra organ in his gorgeous chest. I can't even make a guess at its function."

"An extra organ. Bones, is there any chance—"

"Captain!" Scott shouted.

Apollo had assumed shape and substance on the temple steps. Kirk walked up to him. "Where is Lieutenant Palamas?"

"She is well."

"That's not good enough—"

"She is no longer your concern, Captain Kirk."

"You blood-thirsty heathen, what have you done with her?" Scott cried.

Kirk's stern "No!" came too late. Scott, snatching up a stone, charged Apollo, headlong. The finger extended—and the blue-hot streak lashed from it. Heels over head, Scott was whirled through the air. He fell with a crash; and the rock in his hand rolled down the knoll.

"Well?" Kirk said.

McCoy was kneeling beside Scott's crumpled body. "Not so well, Jim. He's in deep shock."

Kirk glanced at Scott's white face. Blood was seeping from a gash near his mouth. He stood immobile for a long moment, half-seeing the injection McCoy was preparing. Then he whirled to stride up to the temple steps. "All right, Mr, Last of the Gods. You wanted worshippers? You've got enemies. From now on—"

The finger pointed directly at him. The blue-hot flash struck him directly in the chest. It didn't fade. It didn't waver. Kirk choked, hands groping at his heart. He spun around—and fell flat on his face into unconsciousness.

McCoy, instantly beside him, lifted an eyelid. "Two patients," he muttered to nobody. "Two damn fools."

From behind the tree whose trunk had sheltered her from Scott's notice, Carolyn burst out of the dismay that had benumbed her. She flew to the temple steps, crying wildly, "What have you done to them? What have you done?"

"They—needed discipline." Apollo spoke wearily.

She turned her back on him to run to the two stricken crew members. Kirk was climbing slowly to his feet, McCoy's arm about his shoulders. She knelt beside Scott to wipe the blood from his

chin with her robe. He opened his eyes at her touch and smiled faintly at her. "What happened?" he said.

"You let your enthusiasm get the better of your pragmatism," McCoy told him dryly.

"I—I was going to separate his head from his ruddy neck," Scott said.

"And you disobeyed an order not to do it! When we get back to the ship, you'll report for a hearing, Mr Scott!"

"She's—worth it, Captain."

"You're an officer of the Starfleet! Start acting like one! Besides, you stiff-necked thistlehead, you could have got yourself killed!"

Carolyn leaped to her feet, eyes blazing. "Apollo would not kill!"

Kirk stared at her. "*Women.*" he thought. "They'll believe anything's true if they want to believe it is true." He said icily, "Lieutenant, he very nearly has killed—and several times."

"He could—but he *didn't!* Captain, you've got to see! He doesn't want to hurt anyone. He's just—terribly lonely. Please try to understand. He's the god of light, of music. He wouldn't hurt us!"

Kirk gripped her shoulders. "What happened when he took you away?"

"We—just talked."

"What about?"

"Captain, I—"

Kirk's voice was hard as the temple's stone. "Answer me, Lieutenant. What he said may help us."

Her eyes sought the ground. "He—said there was a point of no return… even for gods. Of course he's not a god—but he is *not* inhuman!"

"He's not human, either," Scott said grimly.

"No!" she cried. "He is something greater than human, nobler!"

"Lieutenant, there are four hundred and thirty people on our ship and we're all in trouble."

"Oh, I know it, Captain! Don't you think I know it? I just don't know what—" She burst into tears.

"Go easy on her, Jim."

"Why? So she can play around with an exciting new romance?"

"A god is making love to her. That's strong stuff, Jim."

Kirk shook his head in irritation. "How do you feel, Scotty?"

"I can't move my left arm."

"You won't for a while. There's some neural damage to the arm, Jim. I could repair it if I had the facilities."

"One more reason why we have to get out of here." Kirk walked over to a log, kicked it aside and turned to beckon to McCoy. "Bones, listen. I've been trying to remember my Greek mythology. After expending energy its gods needed rest just as humans do. At any rate, I intend to assume they did."

"You think this Apollo is off somewhere recharging his batteries?"

"That's not so far-fetched. He's disappeared again, hasn't he? Why shouldn't he be resting after the show he put on? Remember he's maintaining a force field on the ship while he drains off energy down here. Point? If we can overwork him, wear him out, that just might do it,"

"The trouble with overworking him is that it could get us all killed."

"Not if we can provoke him into striking one of us again. The energy drainage could make him vulnerable to being jumped by the rest of us."

"I still think we might all get killed."

"Bones, you're a pessimist. It's our only out. When he comes back, we'll try it. Cue Chekov in on the plan. Scotty's useless arm counts him out of any scramble. By the way, let's get him into the shade of the temple. It's hot in the sun."

But Carolyn Palamas had already assisted Scott into the temple's coolness. She was easing him down on a bench. Kirk, following them, heard her say, "I am so sorry, Scotty."

"I'm not blaming you," Scott said heavily, his eyes on her face. He shoved himself up with his right arm. "Carolyn, you must not let yourself fall in love with him!"

"Do you think I *want* to?"

Kirk had had enough. He interrupted them. "You are the one to answer that question, Lieutenant. What is it exactly you *do* want? If you've pulled yourself together, I'd be glad to hear."

"Jim, he's recharged his batteries."

McCoy's warning was very quiet. Kirk spun around.

Strong, glowing, glorious with health, Apollo was reclining against the side of his marble throne, chin on fist, the dark eyes on all of them, watchful.

"Come here," he said.

Kirk, McCoy and Chekov obeyed. "You are trying to escape me. It is useless. I know everything you mortals do."

"You know nothing about us mortals," Kirk said. "The mortals you know were our remote ancestors. It was they who trembled before your tricks. They do not frighten us and neither do you." He spoke with deliberate insolence. "We've come a long way in five thousand years."

"I could sweep you out of existence with a wave of my hand." The radiant smile flashed. "Then I could bring you back. I can give life and I can take it away. What else does mankind demand of its gods?"

"We find one sufficient," Kirk said.

Apollo sighed, bored. "No more debate, mortal. I offer you eternal joy according to the ancient way. I ask little in return. But what I ask for I shall have."

He leaned forward. "Approach me."

They didn't move. Instead, they turned their backs on him and strolled toward the temple entrance.

"I said *approach* me!"

"No." Kirk flung the word over his shoulder.

"You will gather laurel leaves! You will light the ancient fires! You will slay a deer—and make your sacrifice to me!"

Kirk roared with laughter. "Gather laurel leaves? Listen to him!"

"It's warm enough without lighting fires!" shouted McCoy.

Chekov chuckled. "Maybe we should dance around a Maypole."

Apollo rose. "You shall reap the reward of this arrogance."

"Spread out. Get ready," Kirk said quietly. Then he turned, shouting, "We are tired of you and your phony fireworks!"

"You have earned this—"

Apollo had lifted an arm when Carolyn's *"No!"* came in a scream. "No, please, *no!* A father does not destroy his children! You are gentle! You love them! How can they worship you if you hurt them? Mortals make mistakes. You know us!"

"Shsssh," Kirk hissed. She didn't so much as glance at him. She was on her knees now before the throne. "Please—you know so much of love. Don't hurt them!"

The raised arm lowered. Apollo stepped from the dais and bent to lift her in his arms. Then he placed her on his throne. His hand on her neck, he turned to face them.

"She is my love of ten thousand years," he said. "In her name I shall be lenient with you. Bring the rest of your people down to me. They will need homes. Tell your artisans to bring axes."

Kirk's voice was acid with disappointment. "And you'll supply the sheep we herd and the pipes we'll play."

Apollo took Carolyn in his arms. The sunny radiance gathered around them. They dissolved into it—and were gone.

"Captain, we must *do* something!"

Kirk strode over to Scott's bench. "We *were* doing something until that girl of yours interfered with it! All right, she stopped him this time! How long do you think her influence will last?"

It was a question Carolyn was asking herself.

Gods were notoriously unfaithful lovers. Now the summer grass in the olive-groved glade was still green beneath her sandals. But autumn and winter? They would come in their seasons. Summer would pass… and when it went, she would know. Catastrophe—or glory. Now there was no knowing, no knowing of anything but the warmth of his arm around her shoulder.

"They are fools," he was saying. "They think they have progressed. They are wrong. They have forgotten all that gives life meaning—meaning to the life of gods or of mortals."

"They are my friends," she said.

"They will be with you," he said. "I will cause them to stay with you—with us. It is for you that I shall care for them. I shall cherish them and provide for them all the days that they live."

She was trembling uncontrollably. She wrung her hands to still their shaking. He took them in his.

"No dream of love you have ever dreamed is I," he said. "You have completed me. You and I—we are both immortal now."

His mouth was on hers. She swayed and his kiss grew deeper. Then her arms reached for his neck. "Yes, it is true," she whispered. "Yes, yes, yes…"

Kirk glanced at her sharply as she re-entered the temple.

"Lieutenant, where is he?"

She didn't answer; and Scott, raising his head painfully from his bench, saw her face. "What's happened to her? If he—"

She passed him to move on toward the throne. Her look was the absent look of a woman who has just discovered she is one. It was clear that the men of the *Enterprise* had ceased to exist for her.

"She can't talk," Scott said bewilderedly. "He's struck her dumb."

"Easy does it, Scotty," Kirk said. "She won't talk to you. You're too involved. But she'll talk to me."

"Want some assistance, Captain?" Chekov asked.

"How old are you, Ensign Chekov?"

"Twenty-two, sir."

"Then stay where you are," Kirk said. He walked over to the girl. "Are you all right, Lieutenant Palamas?"

She stepped down from the dais. "What?"

"I asked if you are all right."

"All right? Oh yes. I—am all right. I have a message for you."

"Sit down," Kirk said. "Here on this bench. Beside me—here."

She swallowed. "He—he wants us to live in eternal joy. He wants to guard… and provide for us for the rest of our lives. He can do it."

Kirk got up. "All right, Lieutenant, come back from where you are. You've got work to do."

"Work?"

"He thrives on love, on worship. They're his meat."

"He gives so much," she said. "He gives—"

"We can't give him worship. None of us, especially you."

"What?"

"Reject him. You must!"

"I love him," she said.

Kirk rubbed a hand up his cheek. "All our lives, here and on the ship, depend on you."

"No! Not on me. Please, not on me!"

"On you, Lieutenant. Accept him—and you condemn the crew of the *Enterprise* to slavery. Do you hear me? *Slavery!*"

The slate-gray eyes were uncomprehending. "He wants the best for us. And he is so alone, so… so gentle." Her voice broke. "What you want me to do would break his heart. How can I? How can I?" She burst into passionate weeping.

"Give me your hand, Lieutenant."

"What?"

He seized her hand. "Feel mine? Human flesh against human flesh. It is flesh born of the same time. The same century begot us, you and I. We are contemporaries, Lieutenant!"

All sympathy had left his voice. "You are to remember what you are! A bit of flesh and blood afloat in illimitable space. The only

thing that is truly yours is this small moment of time you share with a humanity that belongs to the present. That's where your duty lies. He is the past. His moment in time is not our moment. Do you understand me?"

The slate-gray eyes were anguished. But he sustained the iron in his face until she whispered, "Yes—I understand." She rose, left him, bent distractedly to pick up a tricorder; and half-turning, looked up at the temple's ceiling as though she were listening.

"He's—calling me," she faltered.

"I hear nothing," he said.

She didn't reply. The iron in his face was steel now. Desperate, he grabbed her shoulders. As he touched them, their bone, their flesh seemed to be losing solidity. She grew misty, fading. Kirk was alone with the echo of his own word "nothing".

Sinking down on the bench, he put his head in his hands. *Slavery.* It would claim all of them, McCoy, Scotty, Chekov. And up on the ship, they, too, would be enslaved to the whims of this god of the past. Sulu, Uhura, Spock…

"Spock here, Captain! *Enterprise* to Captain Kirk! *Enterprise* calling Captain Kirk! Come in, Captain!"

"I've gone mad," Kirk said to his hands. His useless communicator beeped again. "Communication restored, Captain! Come in, Captain. First Officer Spock calling Captain Kirk…"

"Kirk here, Mr Spock."

"Are you all right, sir?"

"All right, Mr Spock."

"We have pinpointed a power source on the planet that may have some connection with the force field. Is there a structure of some sort near you?"

Kirk had a crazy impulse to laugh. "Indeed there is, Mr Spock. I'm in it."

"The power definitely emanates from there."

"Good. How are you coming with the force field?"

"Nuclear electronics believes we can drive holes through it by synchronization with all phaser banks. We aim the phasers—and there'll be gaps in the field ahead of them."

Kirk drew a deep lungful of air. "That ought to do it, Mr Spock. Have Sulu lock in every phaser bank we've got on this structure. Fire on my signal—but cut it fine. We'll need time to get out of here."

"I would recommend a discreet distance for all of you, Captain."

"Believe me, Mr Spock, we'd like to oblige but we're not all together. One of us is hostage to the Greek god Apollo. This marble temple is bis power source. I want to know where he is. when we attack it. Kirk out."

"I seem to have lost touch with reality." McCoy was looking curiously at Kirk. "Or maybe you have. Was that Spock you were talking to on that broken communicator—or the spirit world?"

"Function has been restored to it. Don't ask me how. Ask Spock when you see him again. Now we have to get out of here. All phaser banks on the *Enterprise* are about to attack this place. I'll give you a hand with Scotty."

Scott said, "I won't leave, sir." Then his anxiety burst out of him. "Captain, we've got to wait till Carolyn comes back before you fire on the temple. We don't know what he'll do to her if he's suddenly attacked."

"I know," Kirk said. "We'll wait, Scotty."

As he arranged the paralyzed arm around his shoulder, he said, "That mysterious organ in the gorgeous chest, Bones—could it have anything to do with his energy transmissions?"

"I can't think of any other meaning it could have, Jim."

The gorgeous chest, its extra organ notwithstanding, had another meaning for Carolyn Palamas. Its existence had plunged her into the battle of her life. Walking beside her god in the olive-groved glade, her eyes were blank with the battle's torture. It centered itself on one thought alone. She must not let him touch her. If he touched her…

"You gave them my message," he said. "Were they persuaded?"

They'd said he was the source of mysterious power. He was not. He was the source of mysterious rapture. People, millions of them, shared her moment of time.

They crowded it with her. But not one of them could evoke the ecstasy this being of a different time could bring to birth in her just by the sound of his voice.

"*You* persuaded them," he said. "Who could deny you anything?"

His eyes were the night sky, starred. He caught her in his arms; and not for her soul's sake or humanity's either, could she deny him her mouth. She flung her arms around his neck, returned his kiss—and pushed him away.

"I must say that the way you ape human behavior is quite remarkable," she said. "Your evolutionary pattern must be—"

"My what?"

"I'm sure it's unique. I've never encountered any specimen like you before."

"Haven't you?" he said. Running laughter sparkled in the dark eyes as he reached for her again. She held herself rigid, tight, withdrawn. The sparkle flamed into anger. "I am Apollo! I have chosen you!"

"I have work to do."

"Work? *You?*"

"I am a scientist. My specialty is relics—outworn objects of the past." She managed a shaken laugh. "Now you know why I have been studying you." She unslung her tricorder, aiming it at him. "I'd appreciate your telling me how you stole that temple artifact from Greece."

He knocked the tricorder out of her hand. "You cannot talk like this! You love me! You think I do not know when love is returned to me?"

"You confuse me with a shepherd girl. I could no more love you than I could love a new species of bacteria." Lifting the hem of her golden robe, she left him to climb back up the gladed hill. Then he was beside her. Anguish struggled with fury in his face.

"Carolyn, what have you said to me? I forbid you to go! I command you to return to me!"

"I am dying," was what she thought. What she said was: "Is this rage the thunderbolt that dropped your frightened nymphs to their knees?"

An eternity passed. His hand fell from her shoulder.

Then a wild cry broke from him. He raised an arm and shook a fist at the sky. The air in the glade went suddenly sultry, oppressive. The sun disappeared. A chill breeze fluttered her robe as she began to run up the glade's incline.

It did more than flutter Kirk's jacket. A fierce gust of wind blew it half off his shoulders. Under its increasing howl his communicator beeped feebly. "Spock, Captain. Sensors are reporting intense atmospheric disturbance in your area."

The sensors hadn't exaggerated. The clouds over Kirk's head darkened to a sickly, yellowish blackness that hid the glimmer of

the temple's marble. It was cleaved by a three-pronged snake of lightning before it flooded in again. There followed a crack of thunder; and another lightning flash struck from the sky. Kirk heard the sound of splitting wood—and an olive tree not five feet away burst into flame. Grabbing his communicator, he shouted into it. "Stand by, phaser banks! Mr Spock, prepare to fire at my signal!"

Scott rushed to him. "Captain, we've got to go and find her!"

"Here is where we stay, Mr Scott. When he comes back—" The wind took the words from his mouth.

"What if he doesn't, sir?"

"We'll bring him back. When that temple is—"

There was no need to bring him back.

He was back. The God of Storms himself. He topped the olive trees. A Goliath of power, Apollo of Olympus had returned in his gigantic avatar. The great head was flung back in agony, the vast mouth open, both giant fists lifted, clenched against the sky. It obeyed him. It gave him livid lightning forks to hurl earthward and filled his mouth with rolling thunder. Leaves shriveled. The tree trunk beside Kirk began to smoke. Then it flared into fire—and the black sky gave its God of Storms the lash of rain.

Stumbling toward the temple, Carolyn Palamas screamed. The gale's winds tore at her drenched robe. She screamed again as the bush she clung to was whipped from the ground, its branches clawing at her face. Apollo had found her. He was all around her, the blaze of his eyes in the lightning's blaze, in the rain that streamed down her body, the wild cry of the wind in the ears he had kissed. The she saw him. The God of Storms stooped from his height above the trees to show her his maddened face. He brought it closer to her, closer until she shrieked, "Forgive me! Forgive me!—" and lay still.

"Captain, you heard her! She screamed!"

"*Now,* Mr Spock," Kirk said into his communicator.

The incandescing phaser beams struck the temple squarely in its central roof.

"*No! No! No!*"

The god who had appeared before the temple dwarfed it. He had unclenched his fists to spread his hands wide on his up-flung arms. Bolts of blue-hot fire streamed from his fingers.

"Oh, stop it, stop it, *please!*"

Carolyn, running to Apollo, halted. Behind him the temple was wavering, going indistinct. It winked out—and was gone.

She fell to her knees before the man-size being who stood in its place.

He spoke brokenly. "I would have loved you as a father his children. Did I ask so much of you?"

The grief-ravaged face moved Kirk to a strange pity. "We have outgrown you," he said gently. "You asked for what we can no longer give."

Apollo looked down at the girl at his feet. "I showed you my heart. See what you've done to me."

She saw a slight wind stir his hair. She kissed his feet—but she knew. The flesh under her lips, his body was losing substance. Kirk made no move; but he had noted that the arms were spreading wide.

"Zeus, my father, you were right. Hera, you were wise. Our time is gone. Take me home to the stars on the wind…" The words seemed to come from a great distance.

It was very still in the empty space before the ruined temple. "I—I wish we hadn't had to do that," McCoy said.

"So do I, Bones." Kirk's voice was somber. "Everything grew from the worship of those gods of Greece—philosophy, culture. Would it hurt us, I wonder, to gather a few laurel leaves?"

He shook his head, looking skyward.

There were only the sounds of a woman's sobbing and the drip of raindrops from olive trees.

McCoy, sauntering into the *Enterprise* bridge, strolled over to Kirk and Spock at the computer station.

"Yes, Bones? Somebody ill?"

"Carolyn Palamas rejected her breakfast this mornin'."

"Some bug going around?"

"She's pregnant, Jim. I've just examined her."

"*What?*"

"You heard me."

"Apollo?"

"Yes."

"Bones, it's impossible!"

McCoy leaned an arm on the hood of the computer.

"Spock," he said, "may I put a question to this gadget of yours? I'd like to ask it if I'm to turn my Sickbay into a delivery room for a human child—or a god. My medical courses did not include obstetrics for infant gods."

AMOK TIME*

(Theodore Sturgeon) *Hugo Award nominee

It was actually Nurse Christine Chapel who first noticed that there seemed to be something wrong with Spock. Nothing serious—only that he wasn't eating. McCoy, observing him more closely, saw no further sign but what seemed to be a gradual increase in tension, something that might almost have been called "nervousness" if Spock hadn't been half Vulcan. This, McCoy thought, might have been purely a subjective impression on his own part.

It wasn't. On the third day of the apparent fast, Nurse Chapel tried to tempt the First Officer with a vile green concoction called plomik soup, regarded as a delicacy on Vulcan. Spock threw the bowl at her, soup and all.

This was enough to move McCoy to suggest to Spock, a day after the soup incident and apparently without any connection to it, that it was time for his routine checkup.

The logical, unemotional First Officer's verbatim reply to this was, "You will cease to pry into my personal affairs, Doctor, or I shall certainly break your neck."

Regardless of his state of mind—whatever it was—Spock certainly knew that this would not go unreported. He forestalled inquiry by requesting a leave of absence on his home planet. On the present course of the *Enterprise,* he pointed out, a diversion to Vulcan would cost a loss of only 2.8 light-days.

Unfortunately, Kirk had to refuse him. In all the years that Kirk had known him, Spock had never asked for a leave of any sort, and in fact had refused offers; he had leave enough accumulated for six men. But the *Enterprise* was bound for the inauguration ceremonies of the new president of Altair Six—not, apparently, a vital assignment, but the orders left no leeway for side trips, all the same. Kirk suggested that shore leave facilities on Altair Six were excellent; Spock declined the offer stiffly, and that was that.

At least, that should have been that. Not six hours later, while the First Officer was off duty, Kirk discovered that the ship's course had been altered for Vulcan anyhow, on Spock's orders. Leaving

the bridge in Scott's charge, Kirk went directly down to Spock's quarters.

He had seldom visited them before, but he resisted the impulse to look around. He got only the vague impression of a room simple, sparse and vaguely Oriental in decoration and mood, the quarters of a warrior in the field. Spock was seated at a desk studying a small reading screen. Kirk had the briefest of impressions that the screen showed the head of a very young girl, no more than a child, but Spock snapped it off too quickly for him to be sure.

"Well, Mr Spock?"

"Well, Captain?"

"I want an explanation. Why did you change our course?"

"Sir?"

"You changed our course for Vulcan. I want to know why."

Spock frowned slightly. "I changed our course?"

"You deny it?"

"No," Spock said. "By no means, Captain. It is—quite possible."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Captain," Spock said, "I accept, on your word, that I did it. But I do not know why. Nor do I remember doing it." He looked straight at Kirk, his spine stiffening. "And therefore I request that you put me in confinement—securely—where I can neither see nor be seen by anvone."

"But why?"

"Captain, lock me away. I do not wish to be seen. I cannot? No Vulcan could explain further."

"Spock, I'm trying to help you…"

"Ask me no further questions!" Spock almost shouted. "I will not answer!"

"All right," Kirk said evenly. "I'll accede to your request. But first, I order you to report to Sickbay, Mr Spock. McCoy's waiting."

"I don't know how Spock exists with his kind of internal setup," McCoy said. "His normal pulse is in the 240 beats-per-minute range, his blood pressure almost nonexistent by our standards—not that I consider that green stuff of his to be entirely comparable to blood. But that's only Spock under normal conditions, Jim. As

matters stand now, if we don't get him to Vulcan within eight days —or maybe only seven—he'll die."

"*Die?* But why? What's the matter with him?"

"I don't know," McCoy said. "All I can tell you is that there's a growing imbalance of bodily functions. As if in your or my bodies, huge amounts of adrenalin were constantly being secreted into our bloodstreams. Spock won't say why. But unless it's stopped somehow, the physical and emotional pressures will kill him."

"You're convinced he knows what it is?"

"Yes. But he won't tell me."

"He's in the solitary confinement he asked for now?"

"Yes, Jim. And—I wouldn't approach him, if I were you. It's a shocking thing to have to say, but—well, I consider him irrational."

"I'll see him anyhow. What else can I do? There's *got* to be an answer."

"I suppose so," McCoy said. "But Jim—watch out."

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, as gently as possible. "McCoy gave me his evaluation of your condition."

Spock remained silent, his face averted.

"Spock, he says you'll die unless something is done. *What?* Is it something only your planet can do for you?"

No answer.

"Mr Spock. You have been called the best First Officer in the Fleet. That is an enormous asset to me. If I have to lose that First Officer, I want to know why."

Spock stirred, and then began to speak in an almost inaudible voice. "It is a thing that no… outworlder may know—except for the very few that have been involved. A Vulcan understands—but even we do not speak of it among ourselves. It is a deeply personal thing. Captain, cannot you let it rest at that?"

"I cannot," Kirk said. "My ship, my command, my duty are all at stake. I require you to explain. If I must, I'll order you to explain."

"Captain—some things transcend even the discipline of the service."

"That may sometimes be true. But nothing transcends the health, safety and well-being of the members of my crew. Would it help to promise you that I'd consider anything you say to me to be totally confidential?"

Spock hesitated a long moment. At last he said, "It has to do with—with…"

The last word was quite inaudible. Kirk said, "With what?"

"Biology."

"What kind of biology?"

"Vulcan biology."

"You mean, the biology *of* Vulcans? Biology, as in reproduction? Oh, blazes! That's nothing to be embarrassed about. It even happens to birds and bees."

Spock stared at the floor. "The birds and bees are not Vulcans. If they were—if any creature were as proudly logical as we—and had their logic ripped from them—as this time does to us…"

Kirk waited.

"How do Vulcans find their mates?" Spock said. "Haven't you wondered, Captain? How are we selected, one for the other? I'm sure you've heard many jokes on the subject. We are so aloof, so proud, so without feeling, that we invite such jokes."

"Yes, I've heard them," Kirk said. "But jokes aside, I guess the rest of us assume, well, that it's done, uh, quite logically. Eugenically, perhaps."

"It—is not. We shield it with ritual and custom, as shrouded in antiquity as our seven moons. You humans have no conception—it strips our minds from us. It brings a—a madness which rips away our veneer of civilization." Spock slumped, his face pinched with agony. "It is the *pon farr*—the time of mating."

"But you're not a salmon or an eel, man! You're…"

"Half human," Spock finished, painfully. "I had hoped that that would spare me this. But my Vulcan blood is too strong. It drives me home, to take a wife in Vulcan fashion. Or else, as Dr McCoy says, to die."

"Dear God," Kirk said. The lumps in his own belly and throat were now almost too great for him to bear. He could only vaguely imagine what it had cost Spock to tell him this much.

Was there any way out? There were three starships expected to attend the inauguration ceremony: the *Enterprise,* the *Excalibur* and the *Endeavour.* Neither of the others was within range to get Spock to Vulcan in time.

It was not that vital to have three starships at the ceremony, but the orders specified it. If Kirk disobeyed, Starship Command would…

Never mind. Kirk owed his life to Spock, not just once, but half a dozen times. That was worth a career. Kirk stepped to the intercom.

"Mr Chekov, Kirk here. Maintain course for Vulcan. Warp Eight."

"Uh—yes, sir," Chekov's startled voice said.

"Kirk out."

"Captain," Spock said in a low voice.

"Yes, Mr Spock."

"Something happens to us at this time, almost—an insanity—an insanity you—no doubt would find distasteful."

"Should I? You've been patient with my kinds of madness."

"Then—will you beam down with me to the surface of Vulcan, and stand with me? There is a brief ceremony. By tradition, the male is attended by his closest friends."

"Thank you, Mr Spock."

"Also—I believe Doctor McCoy has also guessed the reason behind all this, and has kept his own counsel, and my secret. I would like him to accompany us."

"I believe," Kirk said slowly, "that he will be honored."

The three beamed down to a fairly level arena area. Rocks around its edges gave it a half-natural, half-artificial aspect, as if the wind and ram had carved something like a Stonehenge, or reduced a Stonehenge to something like this. Inside it, there was an open temple—two high arches of stone, an open fire pit, several huge, jade-like wind chimes stirring and chiming in the hot breeze. The rest of the landscape was drifting sand, stretching away to a distant saw-toothed line of mountains jutting up at the edge of the far horizon.

"The land of my family," Spock said. "Our place for mating. It has been held by us for more than two thousand Earth years!" He choked, and gestured toward the temple. "This—is *Koon-ut-Kal-if-fee.* It means, 'The place of marriage and challenge.' In the distant past, we—killed to win our mates. It is still a time of dread for us. Perhaps, the price we pay—for no emotion the rest of the time."

"If it's any of my business—" McCoy began.

"You were invited, Doctor."

"Then—you said this T'Pring you are to meet was already your wife."

"By our parents' arrangement. A ceremony, while we were but seven years of age. One touches the other—thus—as you have seen me do to feel another's thoughts. In this way, our minds were locked together—so that at the proper time we would both be drawn to *Koon-ut-Kal-if-fee.*"

There sounded a distant bell, harmonizing well with the heavier notes of the wind chimes, and then figures began to appear among the rocks. There seemed to be eight or ten of them. Heading the procession, four Vulcan men were carrying someone in an ornate litter or sedan chair. Two other members of the party carried bright-colored, ceremonial objects which consisted of dozens of tiny bells attached to an ornate frame on a pole. As they drew closer, Kirk saw that the person inside the litter was an old woman of immensely authoritative bearing; as the litter was set down and she emerged from it, he recognized her with a shock as one of the high Vulcan elders, T'Pau, the only person who had ever turned down a seat on the Federation Council. Characteristically, Spock had never mentioned that his family was this important.

The bride walked beside her, no child now, but a lithe, graceful, beautiful woman, even by Earth standards. Behind her strode a tall, muscular and rather handsome Vulcan male; and behind him, a slightly shorter but even stronger-looking man who carried a Vulcan war ax. The rest of the procession moved in stately grace behind these principals.

Spock turned and walked to one of the huge wind chimes. Picking up a stone mallet, he struck the chimes, producing a somber male sound which was answered by the shaking of the bell banners. T'Pring seated herself on a carved rock at the temple archway. T'Pau stood in the open in front of the temple, with her back to it and the girl. The muscular young Vulcan stood next to the arch, like a big brick gatepost, while the rest of the entourage lined up in a curve behind them.

With a sudden swift movement, T'Pau raised both her arms. Spock stepped forward and bowed before her. She laid both her hands on his shoulders, as if in a blessing, and then looked beyond him to Kirk and McCoy.

"Spock. Are our ceremonies for outworlders?"

"They are not outworlders," Spock said. "They are my friends. I am permitted this. Their names are Kirk and McCoy. I pledge their behavior with my life."

"Very well." T'Pau turned to the bearers of the bell banners. "*Kah-if-fee!*"

The bell banners were shaken. Spock turned to strike the wind chimes again with his stone mallet—but at the same instant the girl T'Pring sprang to her feet and cried out: "Kah-if-FARR!"

There was a gasp from the Vulcan onlookers; even T'Pau's eyes flickered in startled surprise. Spock mouthed the word without speaking it, his breathing quickening, his eyes narrowed to slits. T'Pring crossed to him, took the mallet from his hand, and tossed it aside. Her expression was strangely contemptuous.

The Vulcan with the ax stepped forward. He looked both amused and dangerous, like an experienced executioner.

"Hey, what's this?" McCoy said. "If there's going to be hanky-panky…"

"All is in order," the old woman said. "She chooses the challenge."

"What?" McCoy pointed at the executioner. "With *him?*"

"No. He acts only if cowardice is seen. T'Pring will now choose her champion. T'Pring: you have chosen. Are you prepared to become the property of the victor? Not merely his wife, but his chattel, with no other rights or status?"

"I am prepared," T'Pring said.

"Then choose."

T'Pring moved regally out into the arena. She stopped by the huge young Vulcan, who straightened proudly, expectantly, but she moved away from him. Then she turned to T'Pau.

"As it was in the dawn of our days," she said, "as it is today, as it will be through all tomorrows, I make my choice." She turned again. "I choose this man."

And she pointed straight at Kirk.

"Now wait a minute—" Kirk said.

At the same moment, the big young Vulcan stepped forward, obviously outraged. "No!" he cried. "I am to be the one! It was agreed! The honor is mine!"

All at once, everyone in the marriage party seemed to be arguing, all in Vulcan. Under cover of the noise, Kirk said swiftly to McCoy, "What happens if I decline?"

"I don't know, Jim. He'd probably have to fight the young man. And in his present condition, he couldn't win. But Jim, this looks like a situation of total combat—and the heat and the air here are pretty fierce. I'm not sure you could win either—even if you'd want to."

"I'm not about to take a dead First Officer back with me. On the other hand, there's T'Pau over there—all of Vulcan wrapped up in one package. How will it look if a Starship Captain backs off from this, afraid?"

"But…"

"And if I can't beat him, if I'm in any danger, I'll give up. Spock wins, honor is satisfied. Or maybe just knock him out…"

"*Kroykah!*" T'Pau said explosively. The hubbub stopped as if turned off by a switch.

The big young Vulcan said, "I ask forgiveness." He went back to his post by the arch, sulky, unrepentant, but no longer defiant.

Kirk said, "I accept." He threw a look toward his First Officer, but Spock seemed oblivious of everything but the ceremony.

"According to our laws," T'Pau said, "combat begins with the *lirpa.*"

Two Vulcan males stepped forward, each carrying a vicious-looking weapon. At one end of a heavy handle was a circular, razor-edged knife; at the other end, a metal cudgel.

"If both survive the *lirpa,*" T'Pau continued, "then combat continues with *ahn woon,* until death. *Klee-et!*"

At this command, Spock wheeled to face Kirk. His eyes blazed with blind savagery as he lifted the weapon. McCoy stepped forward.

"Nothing doing!" McCoy said. "No one mentioned a fight to the death—" his words trailed off as the executioner-like Vulcan stepped in, lifting his ax. Then he swallowed and charged on. "T'Pau, these men are friends. To force them to fight until one is killed…"

"Challenge was lawfully given and accepted. Neither party was forced. However, Spock may release the challenger. Spock! How do you choose?"

Spock continued to eye Kirk, scowling. There was still no sign of recognition. Then, suddenly, he shouted bis answer, hoarsely, scornfully: "*Klee-fah!*"

"That's it, Bones," Kirk said. "Get out of the combat area. There's nothing you can do."

McCoy stood fast. "I claim one right for him then. Your temperature is hot for our kind, your air is thin…"

He was interrupted by a feint from Spock. Kirk dodged, but Spock, slashing again with the blade, abruptly reversed the weapon and caught Kirk a glancing blow with the cudgel end. Kirk

went down, rolling barely in time as Spock reversed again and slashed down hard. The weapon bit into the earth.

Kirk kicked hard at Spock's legs. Now the Vulcan was down, and Kirk was rolling to his feet. He was already sweating, and his breath was whistling in his throat. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the burly axman advancing on McCoy.

"I can't watch you both, Bones!" he shouted. "Get out before you kill me!"

McCoy held his ground. Turning back toward T'Pau, he produced a hypo from his medical kit. "Are Vulcans afraid of fair combat?" he demanded.

"What is this?"

"A high-G vitalizer shot. To compensate for temperature and atmosphere."

"*Kroykah!*" T'Pau said. Everyone froze. "Very well. Your request is reasonable."

McCoy pressed the hypo against Kirk's arm. It hissed, and the physician turned away.

Spock moved in at once. This time it was Kirk who feinted. Spock countered as if they were marionettes tied to the same string. Kirk tried again, with the same result.

With a wordless rumble, Spock launched a lightning kick at Kirk's left hand. Kirk bent aside, and catching the heel of Spock's boot, dumped him. He dived after him, but Spock rolled with unbelievable quickness, so that Kirk hit only the bare ground.

Then both were up, crouching. Spock raised his weapon as if to throw it, and Kirk tensed, ready to jump aside. Spock, however, suddenly reversed the weapon and rushed.

They came together like the impact of two machines, belly to belly, free hand holding weapon wrist, glaring into each other's eyes. Then, with a bone-cracking wrench, Spock whipped Kirk's weapon to the ground.

With two quick, stamping steps, like a flamenco dancer, Spock snapped the knife blade with a loud crack, and then kicked the cudgel end away. He raised his own blade to striking position.

"Spock!" McCoy cried out. "No!"

They were still at close quarters. Kirk hit Spock's wrist with a karate chop. Now it was Spock's *lirpa* that went flying out of reach.

"*Kroykah!*" T'Pau cried.

Again, Spock froze. The Vulcan weapons attendant came hurrying out, carrying what seemed to be no more than two

leather bands about three feet long and four inches wide. One was handed to Spock, who backed up, waiting; Kirk got the other.

"A strip of leather?" Kirk said. "Is that all?"

"The *ahn woon,*" T'Pau said. "Oldest and deadliest of Vulcan weapons."

Kirk inspected it with puzzlement. How on earth was one supposed to use this thing? It wasn't long enough to be an effective whip, and…

Spock did not hesitate. Scooping up a jagged rock, in the same movement he converted the leather strap into a sling. Kirk understood too late. The rock caught him hard in the ribs, and he fell.

As he staggered to his feet, Spock charged him, now holding one end of the strap in each hand. Whipping it around Kirk's legs, he yanked, and down Kirk went again.

Instantly, Spock was at his back, garroting him with the strap. Kirk shifted to try to throw the First Officer over his shoulder, but something odd seemed to be happening to his muscles; they responded very slowly, and didn't move in the way his brain told them to go.

The pressure around his neck tightened. He made one last grab for Spock's hands, but never even came close. The universe darkened. Blood roared in his ears. He felt himself fall flat, blind and paralyzed.

"*Kroykah!*" came T'Pau's voice, as if from a great distance.

There was a sound of running footsteps, coming closer. Then came McCoy's voice, charged with bitterness: "Get your hands off him, Spock. It's finished—he's dead."

It was all most peculiar. Kirk could see nothing, feel nothing, was not even sure he was breathing. He was aware of nothing but the voices, as though he were listening to an exchange over the intercom—or attending a play with his back turned to the stage.

T'PAU: I grieve with you, Doctor.

SPOCK: No! I—no, no…

McCOY: McCoy to *Enterprise.*

UHURA: *Enterprise.* Lieutenant Uhura here.

McCOY: Have Transporter Room stand by for landing party to beam up. Strange as it may seem, Mr Spock, you're in command now. Any orders?

SPOCK: I'll—I'll follow you in a few minutes. Instruct Mr Chekov to plot a course for the nearest base where I must—

surrender myself to the authorities?T'Pring.

T'PRING: Yes.

SPOCK: Explain.

T'PRING: Specify.

SPOCK: Why the challenge; why you chose my Captain as your champion.

T'PRING: Stonn wanted me. I wanted him.

SPOCK: I see no logic in preferring Stonn over me.

T'PRING: He is simple and easily controlled. I calculated the possibilities were these: if your Captain were victor, he would not want me, and so I would have Stonn. If you were victor, you would free me because I dared to challenge, and again I would have Stonn. But if you did not free me it would be the same, for you would be gone again, and I would have your name and your property, and Stonn would still be there.

SPOCK: Flawlessly logical.

T'PRING: I am honored.

SPOCK: Stonn! She is yours. After a time, you may find that *having* is not, after all, so satisfying a thing as *wanting.* It is not logical, but it is often true… Spock here. Ready to beam up… Live long and prosper, T'Pau.

T'PAU: Live long and prosper, Spock.

SPOCK: I shall do neither. I have killed my Captain—and my friend.

Then Kirk's hearing went away too, and for a long time thereafter he knew nothing.

He came gradually back to consciousness in the Sickbay. McCoy was bending over him. Nearby was Spock, his hands over his face. His shoulders were shaking.

Nurse Christine came into his field of view, and turning Spock toward the Captain, gently pulled his hands away from his face. Kirk smiled weakly, and spoke in a faint but cheerful voice.

"Mr Spock—I never thought I'd see the day…"

"Captain!" Spock stared down at him, absolutely dazed with astonishment. Then, obviously realizing what his face and voice were revealing, he looked away.

"Christine," McCoy said, "it might be a good idea for Mr Spock to get some hot food in him. Why don't you feed him some of that awful plomik soup. Then bring him back here for me to run a physical on him. Go on, Spock. She'll explain it to you."

Christine led the First Officer toward the door. But just before he left, Spock said, "It is not awful plomik soup. It is very good plomik soup."

Then he was gone. Kirk and McCoy smiled after him. Then Kirk rolled his head back and wiped the smile off his face.

"You, Mister," he said, "are a quack."

McCoy shrugged. "I made a mistake. Shot you with ronoxiline D by mistake. Nobody lied. You were dead—by all normal standards. I had to get you back up here fast, or you would have been dead by *any* standards."

"Will Spock be all right?"

"I think so. I'll run a full physical on him to make sure."

Kirk started to sit up. "Where are we now?"

"Stay right there," McCoy said, shoving him back. "We're still orbiting Vulcan."

Kirk reached out and snapped on the bedside intercom. "Kirk to Bridge."

"Bridge, sir. Sulu here."

"Take us out of orbit, Mr Sulu. Have the navigator lay in a course for Altair Six at top warp speed. Tell Scotty to pour it on—we've got an inauguration to make!"

"Yes *sir.* Bridge out."

As Kirk dropped back onto the bed, McCoy said sourly, "You know, Jim, some one of these days these ceremonies will be the death of you."

"In which case, Bones, remember: you have standing orders to bring me back to life."

THE DOOMSDAY MACHINE*

(Norman Spinrad) *Hugo Award nominee

Shock after shock. First, the distress call from the *Constellation,* a starship of the same class as the *Enterprise,* and commanded by Brand Decker, one of Kirk's oldest classmates; a call badly garbled, and cut off in the middle.

The call seemed to have come from the vicinity of M-370, a modest young star with a system of seven planets. But when the *Enterprise* arrived in the system, the *Constellation* was not there—and neither was the system.

The star had not gone nova; it was as placid as it had always been. But of the planets there was nothing left but asteroids, rubble and dust.

Lt. Uhura tried to project the line of the distress call. The line led through four more former solar systems—*all* now nothing but asteroids, rubble and dust… No, not quite: The two inner planets of the fifth system appeared to be still intact—and from somewhere near where the third planet should have been, they heard once more the weak beacon of the *Constellation,* no longer signaling distress, but black disaster.

The beacon was automatic; no voice came from her despite repeated calls. And when they found her, the viewscreen showed that two large, neat holes, neat as phaser cuts, had been drilled through her warp-drive pods.

Kirk called a yellow alert at once, though there was no sign of a third ship in the area, except for some radio interference which might easily be sunspots. Scott reported that all main and auxiliary power plants aboard the *Constellation* were dead, but that the batteries were operative at a low level. Her life support systems were operative, too, also at a very low level, except for the bridge area, which—as the viewscreen showed—was badly damaged and uninhabitable.

"We'll board," Kirk said. "The *Constellation* packed as much firepower as we do; I want to know what could cut a starship up like that. And there may be a few survivors. Bones, grab your kit.

Scotty, select a damage control party and come with us. Mr Spock, you'll stay here and maintain Yellow Alert."

"Acknowledge," Spock said.

Aboard the *Constellation,* the lights were weak and flickering, and wreckage littered the deck. The three crewmen of the damage control party found the radiation level normal, the air pressure eleven pounds per square inch, the communications system shorted out, the filtration system dead. The warp drive was a hopeless pile of junk. Surprisingly, the reactor was intact—it had simply been shut down—and the impulse drive was in fair shape.

But there were no survivors—and no bodies.

Kirk thought this over a moment, then called the *Enterprise.* "Mr Spock, this ship appears abandoned. Could the crew have beamed down to one of those two planets?"

"Improbable, Captain," Spock's voice replied. "The surface temperature on the inner planet is roughly that of molten lead, and the other has a poisonous, dense atmosphere resembling that of Venus."

"All right, we'll keep looking. Kirk out."

"The phaser banks are almost exhausted," Scott reported. "They didn't give her up without a battle."

"But *where are they?* I can't understand a man like Brand Decker abandoning his ship as long as his life support systems were operative."

"The computer system is still intact. If the screen on the engineers' bridge is still alive, we might get a playback of the Captain's log."

"Good idea. Let's go."

The screen on the engineers' bridge was in fact dead, but they forgot this almost the moment they noticed it; for seated before the console, staring at the useless instruments, was Commodore Brand Decker. His uniform was tattered, his hair mussed. "Commodore Decker!"

Decker looked up blankly. He seemed to have trouble focusing on Kirk. McCoy was quickly beside him. "Commodore—what happened to your ship?"

"Ship?" Decker said. "Attacked… that thing… fourth planet breaking up…"

"Jim, he's in a state of shock," McCoy said. "No pressure on him now, please."

"Very well. Do what you can for him here. We've got to question him."

"He mentioned the fourth planet," Scott said. "There are only two left now."

"Yes. Pull the last microtapes from the sensor memory bank and beam them across to Spock. I want a full analysis of all reports of what happened when they went in on that planet."

"I've given this man a tranquilizer," McCoy said. "You can try a few questions now. But take it easy."

Kirk nodded. "Commodore, I'm Jim Kirk, in command of the *Enterprise.* Do you understand?"

"*Enterprise?*" Decker said. "We couldn't contact—couldn't run—had to do it—no choice at all…"

"No choice about what?"

"I had to beam them down. The only chance they had?"

"Do you mean your crew?"

Decker nodded. "I was—last aboard. It attacked again—knocked out the transporter. I was stranded aboard."

"But *where* was the crew?"

"The third planet."

"There is no third planet now."

"There was," Decker said. "There *was.* That thing… destroyed it… I heard them… four hundred of my men… calling for help… begging me… and I couldn't…" The Commodore's voice went slower and slower, as though he were an ancient clockwork mechanism running down, and faded out entirely.

"Fantastic," Scott said, almost to himself. "What kind of a weapon could do that?"

"If you had seen it—you'd know," Decker said, rousing himself with obvious effort. "The whole thing is a weapon. It must be."

Kirk said, "What does it look like, Commodore?"

"A hundred times the size of a starship—a mile long, with a maw big enough to swallow a dozen ships. It destroys planets—cuts them to rubble."

"Why? Is it an alien ship—or is it alive?"

"Both—neither—I don't know."

"Where is this thing now?"

"I—don't know that either."

Kirk lifted his communicator. "Mr Spock, still no sign of any other vessel in the vicinity?"

"Well, yes and no, Captain," the First Officer replied. "The subspace radio interference is now so heavy as to cut us off from Starfleet Command; obviously it cannot be sunspots. But our sensors still show only the *Constellation.*"

"How is the tape analysis going?"

"We're ready now, Captain. We find that the *Constellation* was attacked by what seems to be essentially a robot—an automated weapon of great size and power. Its apparent function is to smash planets to rubble, and then 'digest' the debris for fuel. It is, therefore, self-maintaining as long as there are planetary bodies to feed it."

"Origin?"

"Mr Sulu has computed the path of the machine, using the destroyed solar systems detected by ourselves and the *Constellation* as a base course. We find the path leads out of the galaxy at a sharp angle. Projected in the opposite direction, and assuming that the machine does not alter its course, it will go through the most densely populated section of our galaxy."

"Thank you, Mr Spock. Maintain Yellow Alert and stand by. Commodore Decker, you've had a rough time. I think it would be best if you and Dr McCoy beam back to my ship for a physical examination."

"Very well," Decker said. "But you heard your First Officer, Captain. That thing is heading for the heart of our galaxy—thousands of populated planets! *What are you going to do?*"

"I'm going to think," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, have the Transporter Room beam Dr McCoy and Commodore Decker aboard immediately."

A moment later, the two men shimmered out of existence, leaving no one but Kirk and Scott on the dead engineers' bridge.

"They're aboard, Captain," Spock's voice said from the communicator. And then, without any transition at all, "Red alert! Red Alert! Mr Sulu, out of the plane of the ecliptic at sixty degrees north! Warp One!"

"Mr Spock!" Kirk shouted, although of course Spock could have heard him equally well if he had whispered. "Why the alert? Why are you running? I'm blind here."

"Commodore Decker's planet-killer, Captain. It just popped out of subspace. Metallic body, a large funnel-mouth, at least a mile long. It is pursuing us, but we seem to be able to maintain our

distance at Warp One. No, it's gaining on us. Sensors indicate some kind of total conversion drive. No evidence of life aboard. Which is not surprising, since isotope dating indicates that it is at least three billion years old."

"Three *billion!*" Kirk said. "Mr Spock, since it's a robot, what are our chances of deactivating it?"

"I would say none, Captain. I doubt that we would be able to maneuver close enough without drawing a direct attack upon ourselves. We could of course beam men aboard in spacesuits, but since the thing is obviously designed to be a doomsday machine, its control mechanisms would be inaccessible on principle."

"A doomsday machine, sir?" Scott said.

"A calculated bluff, Scotty. A weapon so powerful that it will destroy both sides in a war if it's used. Evidently some race in another galaxy built one—this one—and its bluff was called. The machine is now all that's left of the race—and it's evidently programmed to keep on destroying planets as long as it's functioning."

"Well, whatever happens, we can't let it go beyond us to the next solar system. We have to stop it here. You'd better…"

He was interrupted by the filtered sound of a concussion.

"Mr Spock!" a distant voice called. It sounded like Uhura. "We've taken a hit! The transporter's out!"

"Emergency power on screens. Maximum evasive action! Phaser banks…"

And then the communicator went dead.

"Spock! Come in! Spock!" It was useless. "Scotty—we're stuck here. Deaf and blind."

"Worse than that, Captain. We're paralyzed, too. The warp drive is just so much wreckage."

"We can't just sit here while that thing attacks our ship. Forget the warp drive and get me some impulse power—half-power, quarter-power, anything I can maneuver with, even if you have to get out and push."

"But we'd never be able to outrun…"

"We're going to fight the thing, not outrun it," Kirk said grimly. "If we can get this hulk going, we may be able to distract the robot, and give the *Enterprise* a better chance to strike at it. Get cracking, Scotty. I'm going to see what I can do with this viewscreen. We can't move until I can see where we're going."

Seated in the Captain's chair, Spock evaluated the damage. Warp and impulse drives were still operative. As he checked, Commodore Decker and McCoy watched him tensely.

"Communications?"

"Under repair, Mr Spock," Uhura said.

"Transporter?"

Sulu said, "Also under repair."

"Hmm," Spock said. "Random factors seem to have operated in our favor."

"In plain, non-Vulcan English," McCoy said, "we've been lucky."

"Isn't that what I said, Doctor?" Spock said blandly.

"The machine's veering off," Sulu reported. "It's back on its old course. Next in line is the Rigel system."

"No doubt programmed to ignore anything as small as a ship beyond a certain radius," Spock said. "Mr Sulu, circle back so we can pick up the Captain while we effect repairs. We may have to take the *Constellation* in tow…"

"You can't let that thing reach Rigel!" Decker broke in. "Millions of innocent people…"

"I am aware of the population of the Rigel colonies, Commodore, but we are only one ship. Our deflector generators are strained. Our radio is useless as long as we are in the vicinity of the robot. Logic dictates that our primary duty is to survive to warn Starfleet Command."

"Our primary duty is to maintain the life and safety of Federation planets! Helmsman, belay that last order! Track and close on that machine!"

Sulu looked questioningly at Spock. It was a difficult problem. Kirk had left Spock in command, but Decker was the senior officer aboard. Spock said evenly, "Carry out my last order, Mr Sulu."

"Mr Spock," Decker said, "I'm formally notifying you that I am exercising my option under regulations as senior officer to assume command of the *Enterprise.* That thing has got to be destroyed."

"You attempted to destroy it before, sir," Spock said, "and it resulted in a wrecked ship and a dead crew. Clearly a single ship cannot combat that machine."

Decker winced, then stabbed a finger at Spock. "That will be all, Mr Spock. You're relieved of command. Don't force me to relieve you of duty as well."

Spock got up. McCoy grabbed his arm. "Spock, you can't let him do this!"

"Unfortunately," Spock said, "Starfleet Order one-zero-four, Section B, reads, Paragraph A, 'In the absence of the…' "

"To blazes with regulations! How can you let him take command when you *know* he's wrong?"

"If you can officially certify Commodore Decker medically or psychologically unfit to command, I may relieve him under Section C."

"I can't do that," McCoy said. "He's as sound as any of us. I can say his present plan is crazy, but medically I'd have to classify that as a difference of opinion, not a diagnosis."

"Mr Spock knows his duties under the regulation," Decker said. "Do you, Doctor?"

"Yes, sir," McCoy said disgustedly. "To go to Sickbay and wait for the casualties you're about to send me." He stalked out.

"Hard about and close," Decker said. "Full emergency power on deflectors. Stand by on main phaser banks."

On the viewscreen, the planet-killer began to grow in size. Decker stared at it with grim intensity, as though the combat to come was to be a personal one, hand-to-hand.

"In range, sir," Sulu reported.

"Fire phasers!"

The beams lanced out. It was a direct hit—but there seemed to be no effect at all. The beams simply bounced off.

In answer, a pencil of solid blue light leapt out of the maw of the planet-killer. The *Enterprise* seemed to stagger, and for a moment all the lights went down.

"Whew!" Sulu said. "What is that thing?"

"It's an anti-proton beam," Decker said in an abstracted voice. "It's what the machine cut the fourth planet up with."

"The deflectors weren't built to take it, sir," Spock said. "The next time, the generators may blow."

Decker paid no attention. "Keep closing and maintain phaser fire."

Spock studied his instruments. "Sir," he said, "sensors indicate that the robot's hull is neutronium—collapsed matter so dense that a cubic inch of it would weigh a ton. We could no more get a phaser beam through it than we could a matchstick. If we could somehow get a clear shot at the internal mechanism…"

"Now that's more like it, Mr Spock. We'll cut right across the thing's funnel and ram a phaser beam down its throat. Helmsman, change course to intercept."

Sulu shifted the controls cautiously, obviously expecting another blow from the anti-proton beam; but evidently the monstrous mechanism had no objection to having this morsel sailing directly into its maw.

"Fire!"

The phasers cut loose. Sulu studied the screen intently.

"Those beams are just bouncing around inside," he reported. "We can't get a shot straight through."

"Close in."

"Sir," Spock said, "any closer and that anti-proton beam will go through our deflectors like tissue paper."

"We'll take the chance. Thousands of planets are at stake."

"Sir, there is no chance at all. It is pure suicide. And attempted suicide would be proof that you are psychologically unfit to command. Unless you give the order to veer off, I will relieve you on that basis."

"Vulcan logic!" Decker said in disgust. "Blackmail would be a more honest word. All right, helmsman, veer off—emergency impulse power."

"Commodore," Sulu said in a strained voice, "I can't veer off. That thing's got some kind of a tractor beam on us."

"Can it pull us in?"

"No, sir, we can manage a stand-off, for perhaps seven hours. In the meantime it can take pot shots at us whenever it likes."

On the engineers' bridge of the *Constellation,* the viewscreen finally lit. Kirk stared at what it showed with shock and disbelief. A gasp from behind him told him that Scott had just entered the bridge.

"Is Spock out of his mind?"

"I don't understand it either—I ordered evasive action. What's the situation below?"

"We've got the screens up, but they won't last more than a few hours, and they can't take a beating. As for the impulse drive, the best I can give you is one-third power. And at that I'll have to nurse it."

"Go ahead then. We've got to break up that death-dance out there somehow." As Scott left, Kirk once more tried his communicator. To his gratification, he got Lt. Uhura at once; evidently the *Enterprise,* too, had been making repairs. "Lieutenant, give me Mr Spock, fast."

But the next voice said: "*Enterprise* to Kirk. Commodore Decker here."

"Decker? What's going on? Give me Mr Spock!"

"I'm in command here, Captain. According to regulations, I assumed command on finding Mr Spock reluctant to take proper action…"

"You mean you're the lunatic responsible for almost destroying my ship? Mr Spock, if you can hear me, I give you a direct order to answer me."

"Spock here, Captain."

"Good. On my personal authority as Captain of the *Enterprise,* I order you to relieve Commodore Decker. Commodore, you may file a formal protest of the violation of regulations involved with Starfleet Command—if any of us live to reach a star base. In the meantime, Mr Spock, if the Commodore resists being relieved, place him under arrest. Is that clear?"

"Not only is it clear," Spock's voice said, "but I have just done so. Your further orders, sir?"

"Get away from that machine!"

"Sir, we can't; we have been pegged by a tractor. The best we can do is prevent ourselves from being pulled inside it, for about the next six point five hours—or until it decides to shoot at us again."

"I was afraid of that. All right, I'm going to move the *Constellation* into your vicinity and see if I can distract the machine. With the power I've got available, it will take at least three hours. Is your transporter working again, too?"

"Yes, sir, but I assure you that you'd be no safer here than there."

"I'm aware of that, Mr Spock. I just want to be sure you can beam me aboard once we're in range, so I can take command personally from the Commodore if he gives you any trouble. That's all for now. Kirk out."

Kirk set the *Constellation* in creaking motion and then thought a while. Finally he called Scott.

"How's the drive holding up, Scotty?"

"Under protest, I would say, sir," Scott responded. "But if you don't demand any violent maneuvers I think it'll stay in one piece."

"Very well. Now I need an engineering assessment. What would happen if the reactor were to go critical?"

"Why, Captain, you know as well as I do—a fusion explosion, of course."

"Yes, Scotty, but if *this* reactor were to do so, how big would the explosion be?"

"Oh," Scott's voice said. "That's easily answered, the potential is always on the faceplate of a ship's reactor; I'll just check it… The figure is 97.8 megatons."

"Would the resulting fireball be sufficient to disrupt a neutronium hull?"

"Neutronium, sir? You mean the planet-killer? What makes you think the hull is neutronium?"

"Because from this distance the *Enterprise* could have cut it into scrap metal by now if it weren't."

"Hmm—aye, that follows. Well, Captain, neutronium is formed in the cores of white dwarf stars, with fusion going on all around it. So I'd say the fireball would just push the machine away, rather than collapsing the hull. And sir, in a vacuum the fireball would be something like a hundred and fifty miles in diameter. That means it would envelop the *Enterprise* too—and *we* don't have a neutronium hull."

"That's true, but it isn't what I have in mind. Scotty, I want you to rig a thirty-second delayed detonation switch, so the reactor can be blown from up here on the engineers' bridge. Can do?"

"Aye, sir," Scott said. "But why…"

"Just rig it, fast. Then get yourself and the damage control party up here. Kirk to *Enterprise.*"

"Spock here."

"Mr Spock, I don't have any sensors over here worth mentioning, so I won't know when I'm in transporter range. The instant I am, let me know."

"Acknowledge. May I ask your intent, Captain?"

"Scotty is rigging a thirty-second delayed detonation switch on the impulse power reactor of the *Constellation.* I am going to pilot the vessel right down the planet-killer's throat—and you'll have thirty seconds to beam the five of us aboard the *Enterprise* before the reactor blows."

There was a brief pause. When Spock's voice returned, there actually seemed to be a faint trace of human concern in it. "Jim, thirty seconds is very fine timing. The transporter is not working at a hundred per cent efficiency; our repairs were necessarily rather hasty."

"That's a chance I'll have to take. However, it does change things a little. I'll want you to beam Mr Scott and the damage control party over as soon as we are in range. I'll be the only one to stay aboard until the last minute."

"Acknowledge. Sir, may I point out two possible other flaws?"

While Spock was talking, Scott came into the room carrying a small black box. Mounted on it was a single three-position knife switch—that is, one with two slots for the blade, the third position being disengaged from either. He set it down on the panel in front of Kirk.

"Go ahead, Mr Spock, your advice is half your value. Where are the flaws?"

"First, we cannot know the composition of the interior workings of the planet-killer. If they too are neutronium, nothing will happen except that it will get very hot inside there."

" 'Very hot' is certainly a mild way of putting it," Kirk said drily. "All right, Mr Spock, to use logic right back at you, Proposition A: The planet-killer operates in a vacuum, which means most of its circuits are cryogenic. Heating them a few million degrees may be quite enough to knock it out. Proposition B: Pure neutronium cannot carry an elecrical current, because its electron shells are collapsed. Hence, many important parts of the planet-killer's interior cannot be neutronium. Conclusion: an interior fusion explosion will kill it. How is that for a syllogism?"

"It is not a syllogism at all, Captain, but a sorites; however, I agree that it is a sound one. My second objection is more serious. The planet-killer is open to space at one end, and that is the end facing us. The neutronium hull will confine the fireball and shoot it directly out of the funnel at the *Enterprise* in a tongue of flame hundreds of miles long. This is an undesirable outcome."

Kirk almost laughed, although there was nothing in the least funny about the objection itself. "Mr Spock, if that happens, we will all die. But the planet-killer will have been destroyed. Our mandate is to protect Federation lives, property and Interests. Hence this outcome, as you call it, is in fact more desirable than undesirable."

"Now that," Spock said, "*is* a syllogism, and a sound one. Very well, Captain, I withdraw my objections."

When Kirk put down the communicator, he found Scott staring at him ruefully. "Your sense of humor," the engineer said ruefully, "comes out at the oddest times. Well, there is your detonator, Captain. When you pull the switch into the *up* position, it's armed. When you push it down into the other slot, you have thirty seconds until *blooey!*"

"Simple enough."

"Captain," Spock's voice came again. "The *Constellation* has just come within transporter range. However, when you are ready to have your party beam over, I suggest that you leave the bridge. We do not have fine enough control to pick four men out of five, and even if we did, we would not know which four of the five until it was too late."

"Very well, Mr Spock. I will leave the bridge; make your pickup in sixty seconds."

He got up. As he was at the door, Scott said, "Take care, Jim."

"Scotty, I don't *want* to die, I assure you."

When he returned, the engineers' bridge was empty; but Scott's voice was still there. It was coming from the communicator, and it was using some rather ungentlemanly language.

"Scotty, what's the matter? Are you all right?"

"Aye, I'm all right, skipper, and so are we all—but the transporter blew under the load. I dinna ken hae lang it'll take to fix it."

The return of Scott's brogue told Kirk how serious the situation actually was. Kirk did not even say, "Well, do your best." It was unnecessary.

The next few hours were an almost intolerable mixture of loneliness and tension, while the monstrous shape of the planet-killer and its mothlike captive grew slowly on the screen.

Yet not once in all this time did the robot again fire its anti-proton beam, which probably would have gone through the *Enterprise* like a knife through cheese; the ship was using almost all her power in fighting against the tractor ray. That, Kirk supposed, was a present given them by the nature of machine intelligence; the robot, having settled on the course of drawing the *Enterprise* into itself—and, probably, having estimated that in such a struggle it could not lose, eventually—saw no reason to take any other action.

"Mr Spock?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Don't fire on that thing again. Don't do *anything* to alter present circumstances—not even sneeze."

"I follow you, Captain. If we do not change the parameters, the machine mindlessly maintains the equation."

"Well, that's what I hope. How is the transporter coming?"

"Slowly. Mr Scott says half its resistors are burned out. They are easy to replace individually, but so many is a time-consuming task."

"Computation?"

"We may have a most unreliable repair done when the *Constellation* is within a hundred miles of the robot. Sir, we also compute that one hundred miles is the limit of the robot's defensive envelope, inside which it takes offensive action against moving objects under power."

"Well, I can't very well shut off power. Let's just hope it's hungry."

The funnel swelled, much faster now. Kirk checked his watch, then poised his hand over the switch.

"Mr Spock, I'm running out of time myself. Any luck now on the transporter?"

"It may work, Captain. I can predict no more."

"All right. Stand by."

The funnel now covered the entire star field; nothing else was to be seen but that metal throat. Still the robot had not fired.

"All right, Spock! Beam me aboard!"

He threw the switch. An instant later, the engineers' bridge of the doomed *Constellation* faded around him, and he found himself in the Transporter Room of the *Enterprise.* He raced to the nearest auxiliary viewscreen. Over the intercom, Spock's voice was counting: "Twenty-five seconds to detonation. Computer, mark at ten seconds and give us a fiftieth of a second warp drive at Warp One at second zero point five."

This order baffled Kirk for an instant; then he realized that he was *still* looking down the throat of the doomsday machine, and that Spock was hoping to make a short subspace jump away the instant the robot's tractor apparatus was consumed—if it was.

"Fifteen seconds. *Mark.* Five seconds. Four. Three. Two. One."

Flick!

Suddenly, on the auxiliary screen, the doomsday machine was thousands of miles away. The screen zoomed up the magnification to restore the image.

As it did so, a spear of intolerable light grew out of the mouth of the funnel. Promptly, Kirk ran for the elevators and the control room.

A silent group was watching the main viewscreen, including Commodore Decker. The tongue of flame was still growing. It now looked to be at least two hundred miles long. It would have consumed the *Enterprise* like a midge.

Then, gradually, it faded. Spock checked his board.

"Did it work?" Kirk demanded.

"I cannot tell yet, Captain. The radiation from the blast itself is too intense. But the very fact that we broke away indicates at least some damage… Ah, the radiation is decaying. Now we shall see."

Kirk held his breath.

"Decay curve inflecting," Spock said. "The shape—yes, the curve is now exponential. All energy sources are deactivated. Captain, it is dead."

There was a pandemonium of cheering. Under cover of the noise, Decker moved over to Kirk.

"My last command," he said in a low voice. "But you were right, Captain Kirk. My apologies for usurping your command."

"You acted to save Federation lives and property, as I did. If you in turn are willing to drop your complaint against my overriding regulations—which you have every right to make—we'll say no more about it."

"Of course I'll drop it. But the *Constellation* is nevertheless my last command. I cannot forget that my first attempt to attack that thing cost four hundred lives—men who trusted me—and that I had the bad judgment to try it again with *your* men's lives. When a man stops learning, he's no longer fit to command."

"That," Kirk said, "is a judgment upon yourself that only you can make. My opinion is that it is a wise and responsible judgment. But it is only an opinion. Mr Sulu?"

"Sir?"

"Let's get the dancing in the streets over with, and lay a course for Star Base Seventeen."

"Yes, sir." But the helmsman could not quite stop grinning. Spock, of course, never grinned, but he was looking, if possible, even more serious than usual.

"Mr Spock, you strike me as a man who still has some reservations."

"Only one, Captain; and it is pure speculation."

"Nevertheless, let's hear it."

"Well, Captain, when two powers prepare forces of such magnitude against each other, it almost always means that they are at a state of technological parity; otherwise they would not take such risks of self-destruction."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, sir, that the existence of one such doomsday machine implies the existence of another."

"I suppose that's possible," Kirk said slowly, repressing a shudder. "Though the second one may not have been launched in time. Well, Mr Spock, supposing we were to hear of another? What would you do?"

Spock's eyebrows went up. "That is no problem, sir. I would feed it a fusion bomb disguised as a ship, or better still, an asteroid; that is not what concerned me. The danger, as such, can now be regarded as minimal, even if there *is* another such machine."

"Then if you weren't thinking of the danger, what *were* you thinking of?"

"Of the nuisance," Spock said. "Having to deal with the same problem twice is untidy; it wastes time."

Kirk thought back to those hours aboard the haunted hulk of the *Constellation*—and of the four hundred dead men on the devoured planet.

"I," he said, "prefer my problems tidy. It saves lives."

WOLF IN THE FOLD

(Robert Bloch)

The planet Argelius boasted the most popular Venusbergs in the galaxy. And spacemen's favorite was a café that featured the bellydancing of the lushly exotic Kara. The other lovely women who companioned its male guests at their tables were an old, if still pleasing story to Kirk and McCoy. But they were a blissfully new one to Scott. He sat with them, glancing around him, enraptured. Then his eyes returned to Kara's sinuous grace as she twisted it on the dance floor, her transparent gold skirt swirling around her.

Beaming, Scott said unnecessarily, "I like Argelius."

"Very little about it not to like," Kirk said.

"You mean to tell me these women, these beauties—I mean, all this is…"

"The Argelians think very highly of pleasure," Kirk told him.

McCoy laughed. "There's an understatement if ever I heard one! This is a completely hedonistic society."

"Like Kara, Scotty?" Kirk asked.

There was a fervent "Aye!" from Scott, at which Kirk said, "Good. I've invited her to join us. It occurred to me you might like to meet her."

"Now that's what I call a Captain!" Scott exclaimed. "Always thinking of his men."

"You're not drinking, Jim," McCoy said. "The few polyesters in this native extract—good for the soul. Not to mention the body."

"I don't suppose a little loosener-upper would hurt." Kirk sipped his drink.

Scott, his eyes on Kara, said, "Mr Spock should see us now."

McCoy snorted. "He'd just be 'fascinated' by the picturesque folk costumes in the place."

Kara had come to a spinning stop, her hands slanted over her eyes in the immemorially seductive gesture of simulated prudery.

The café's dimness lit with sparks as though someone had released a swarm of fireflies. Scott pounded enthusiastically on the table.

Amused, Kirk said, "It's an Argelian custom to demonstrate one's approval by blinking delight lights."

"You telling an old Glasgow pub crawler how to applaud, Captain?" Scott said. Then all three men rose from their table. Kara was gliding toward them. As she approached, Kirk noted a young man at the bar. He had shoved his drink aside, his face darkened by a scowl. It deepened when Scott seated the girl beside him. Suddenly the scowler seized his drink, drained it and walked out of the café. Nor was the dancer's elderly musician pleased by the warmth of her smile at Scott. Laying aside his flutelike instrument, he averted his eyes from their table.

Scott, oblivious of everything but Kara's nearness, leaned forward to place his hand over hers.

"Tis a fine foggy night tonight," he said. "Did anyone ever tell you about the grand fogs we have in Edinburgh?"

"Never a word," she said. "But I'm dying to learn."

"Then why don't I show you? There's naught like a walk in a fog with a bonny lass."

"Or a handsome gentleman. Why don't we go?"

The sun on Scott's face would have dispersed even an Edinburgh fog. Kara's hand still in his, he got up. "You don't mind, do you?" he asked the others. "I might even get back to the ship on time."

"Don't hurry, Scotty," Kirk said. "Relax and enjoy yourself. That's what Argelius is all about."

He looked thoughtfully after them as they left. "My work is never done, Bones."

"My work, Jim. This is strictly prescription stuff. That explosion that threw Scotty against the bulkhead was caused by a woman."

"You're sure the physical damage is all cleared up?"

"Yes. But the psychological damage? I didn't like his resentment of all women after it happened."

"I defy any man to stay angry at women on a planet like this."

"When Scotty gets back to the ship, Jim, he may hate you for making him leave Argelius. But I'll bet my professional reputation he'll be finished with any lingering dislike of women."

"Well," Kirk said, "I think we've accomplished what we came here for. Bones, there's a spot across town where the women are

so…”

“I know the place,” McCoy interrupted. “Let’s go.”

The fog outside was thicker than they had expected. Light from the door they opened was diffused against coils of clammy mist that made it hard to choose direction. Kirk hesitated.

“I think we bear left,” he said. But the turn they took led them into an alley. They had paused, about to retrace their steps, when a woman’s agonized scream tore the silent darkness before them. “It came from there!” Kirk shouted, and plunged deeper into the foggy alley, McCoy at his heels. They both stopped at the sound of heavy breathing. Kirk took a forward step only to stop again. He had stumbled over a body.

It was sprawled, face down, on the damp paving. The back of the cloak it wore was ripped by venomous slashes.

McCoy, kneeling beside it, lifted the head. After a long moment, he raised a face that was blanched with horror. “It’s Kara,” he said. “Dead. Stabbed a dozen times.”

The heavy breathing sound came again. They ran toward it. Scott was crouched against the alley wall. He stared at them unseeingly, his face twisted into a grimace. In his hands he held a long, sharp knife. It was wet with blood.

The café had got rid of its customers, and bright lights had replaced its dimness. Unspeaking, Kirk and McCoy stood beside the table where Scott sat, huddled, his face in his hands. Like Scott, they made no move when the pudgy, round-faced man who faced them said, “Argelius is the last planet in the galaxy where I’d expect a thing like this to happen. I’m at a loss to explain it, gentlemen.”

“We are just as shocked as you are, Mr Hengist,” Kirk assured him.

“If this were my home planet, Rigel IV,” Hengist was saying, “I’d have a dozen investigators at my disposal as Chief City Administrator. But they don’t exist here.”

“Then you are not a native Argelian, sir?” McCoy asked.

“No. Argelius hires its administrative officers from other planets. Its people’s virtue is gentleness, not efficiency.”

“You can count,” Kirk told him, “on our complete cooperation. We will conduct ourselves according to your local laws.”

"That's the trouble," Hengist frowned. "There are no laws to deal with a thing like this. Ancient traditions, of course, dating back before the great Argelian Awakening. But they're rather barbaric. I can't be expected to put your Mr Scott to torture."

"We might be able to help," Kirk suggested. "We have equipment on the *Enterprise* which would help us get at the facts."

Hengist shook his head. "That's quite impossible, Captain, quite impossible. The investigation must take place here."

He picked up the murder knife from the table, looking down at the broken figure of Scott. "Mr Scott—Mr Scott, kindly rouse yourself! Are you sure you've never seen this knife before?"

Scott stared, dull eyed, at the knife.

Kirk spoke sharply. "Answer him, Scott!"

"I—don't remember," Scott said.

Hengist made a gesture of impatience. He looked at Kirk. "You can scarcely call that helpful, Captain!"

Kirk pulled up a chair beside Scott. "Scotty," he said quietly, "you left the café with the girl. You remember that, don't you? What happened next?"

The dull eyes turned to him. "We were walking—the fog. I was ahead of her, trying to lead the way. Then—then I heard her scream. I remember starting to turn—"

His face contorted. Then words burst out of him. "I can't remember another thing!"

Beckoning to McCoy, Kirk got up from the chair. "Well, Bones?" he said.

"If he says he can't remember, he probably doesn't. You know Scotty."

"I also know a murder has been committed—and that we found him with a bloody knife in his hand."

"That proves nothing," McCoy said. "Surely you don't think…"

"What I think doesn't make any difference! We're guests here! A member of my crew is under suspicion!"

"But you don't throw him to the wolves!" cried McCoy.

"I've got a diplomatic responsibility, Bones. This happened under Argelian jurisdiction. If they want to arrest Scotty, put him through trial here—even convict him, I've got to go along with them." He paused. "Besides, this business of not remembering…"

"Jim, he's just recovering from a very severe concussion! Partial amnesia after a thing like that is not only possible, it's probable.

Especially under great stress."

"It's out of my hands, Bones. We'll do all that we can—but only under Argelian laws. There's Hengist at him again. Let's get back."

The pudgy man had replaced the knife on the table. "Not very promising, Captain Kirk. Your man still insists he remembers nothing. But my detector readings show his fingerprints on the murder weapon."

"Mr Hengist," said Kirk, "other people left this café at about the same time Mr Scott and the girl did."

"So I've been told by the staff. Those people will be located and questioned. But the outlook for your friend is pretty grim. I'm a man who prides himself on doing his job well. This crime will be solved and its perpetrator punished!"

"What is the law in such cases, Mr Hengist?"

A deep voice spoke. "The Law of Argelius, sir, is love."

Kirk turned. A tall, white baked, distinguished man had entered the café. A woman, almost as tall, was with him. Slim, elegant, her black hair touched with gray at the temples, the quiet gravity of her composure was impressive. Hengist bowed deeply to them both.

"Gentlemen," he said, "our Prefect—Jaris. Sir, Captain Kirk and Dr McCoy."

Presenting the beautiful woman, Jaris said, "My wife, Sybo."

She inclined her head. "And this man at the table is Scott," Hengist said. "The one I told you about in my message."

Jaris's tranquil eyes studied Scott's face. "He does not look like a man capable of murder. Still, it has been so long since—" The deep voice spoke to Kirk and McCoy. "Gentlemen, before our great awakening hundreds of years ago, we had ways of learning the truth in such matters. We will return to them."

"The Argelian empathic contact, sir?" McCoy said.

"You know of it, Doctor?"

"I've heard of it. I had assumed it was a lost art."

"My wife is a descendant of the ancient priestesses of our land," Jaris said. "She has the old gift. I have come to invite you all to my home."

Hengist protested. "Prefect, don't you think this should be handled in an official manner through my office?"

"It *shall* be handled in an official manner, inasmuch as I am the highest official of Argelius." The rebuke was as gently spoken as it was courteous. "We will now proceed to my home. There my wife

will prepare herself—and we shall learn the truth. Sybo—" He stood aside, bowing, and she moved past him to the café door.

Her drawing room was as impressive as their hostess. It was high-ceilinged, circular and windowless. Luxurious draperies covered its exits. Its tables, chairs, its cabinets matched the draperies in taste. Against one wall there was a simple altar of rich wood. A single flame rose from it.

"I have informed my ship, sir," Kirk turned to Jaris, "that there will be a delay in our return."

"Well done, Captain." Jaris nodded. "Let us proceed. Pray be seated, everyone."

McCoy was restive. "Prefect, depending on your lovely wife's empathic abilities is all very well. But I am a scientist, sir. And my science has available a precise method by which we can discover what it is that Mr Scott cannot remember. Since you won't permit us to go to our ship, I can beam down a technician with my psychotricorder. It will give us a detailed account of all that has happened to Mr Scott within the past twenty-four hours."

"I advise against it, Prefect," Hengist said. "This is a purely Argelian matter."

"My wife must meditate for a time before she is ready," Jaris told him. "I see no reason why we should not employ that time to all possible use. Very well, Dr McCoy."

McCoy whipped out his communicator. "McCoy to *Enterprise*."

"Spock here, Doctor."

"Mr Spock, please beam down a technician with a psychotricorder immediately. Use these coordinates."

"Acknowledged. Coordinates received and read," Spock answered.

"Thanks. McCoy out."

Jaris was confiding his own problems to Kirk. "News of this frightful event is spreading among our people. They are greatly disturbed. Already there is talk of placing Argelius under embargo to space vehicles."

"That would be most unfortunate, sir. Argelius is widely known for its hospitality. It also owns strategic importance as a spaceport. It is the only one in this quadrant."

"Prefect," McCoy intervened, "the tricorder examination will require privacy to be effective."

"There is a small chamber below this room. Perhaps it will suffice, Doctor."

Hengist rose from his chair. "I do not wish to seem argumentative, Prefect, but I must point out that these two gentlemen are Mr Scott's friends. They *want* to clear him!"

"And if he is innocent, do you not want to clear him, too, Mr Hengist?"

The mild question rattled Hengist. "Why—I—of course," he stammered. "I am only interested in the truth."

"So are we all," said Kirk brusquely.

The flustered City Administrator addressed Jaris. "There are other people to be questioned. Perhaps I should go to expedite their arrival here."

"Please do so," said the Prefect. "Anyone who has any connection with the murder should be here during the ceremony."

But Hengist's departure was delayed by the Transporter dazzle that appeared near McCoy's chair. It gradually assumed the extremely attractive shape and features of crewwoman Karen Tracy. Hengist eyed her. Then, nodding to her, he passed her and disappeared through a draped door.

The girl, a psychotricorder slung over her shoulder, said, "Lieutenant Karen Tracy, Doctor, reporting as ordered."

Scott, dismay in his face, half rose from his chair. "A—a woman," he mumbled.

Kirk saw Jaris's keen eyes fix on him. "You don't like women, Mr Scott?"

"It's not that, Prefect," McCoy said quickly. "He was recently involved in an accident caused by a careless woman. He suffered a severe concussion."

"Damage to his brain, Doctor?"

"Some. But in my best opinion, it could not possibly be responsible for…"

"I suggested nothing, Doctor."

"No. Of course you didn't." McCoy made a visible effort to get his anxiety back under control. "Lieutenant, I want a twenty-four-hour regressive memory check on Mr Scott. All possible amnesic gaps to be probed."

"Yes, Doctor. Where shall I set up?"

"If you will follow me, young lady—" Jaris was leading the way toward the room's nearest exit when Kirk spoke to Scott. "You are to give Lieutenant Tracy complete cooperation. Maybe we can clear this thing up once and for all."

At the look in Scott's eyes, Kirk had to down an impulse to place an encouraging hand on his shoulder. "Yes, Captain. This—not remembering—it's hard to take."

Kirk watched him go with Tracy and Jaris. "All right, Bones. We're alone. Opinions?"

McCoy was grave. "Jim, in normal circumstances, Scotty simply couldn't have done such a thing. But that knock on the head—it could have tossed all his previous behavior patterns into a junk heap. What worries me is that he's telling the truth about not remembering."

"Why does it worry you?"

"Hysterical amnesia. When a man feels guilt about something—something too terrible to face up to—he will blot it out of his conscious memory."

Kirk felt his mind wince away from the words. Was it possible that Scott's conscious memory was sparing him recollection of an action too appalling to remember? The windowless room seemed suddenly suffocating. I need fresh air, he thought—but Jaris had returned, And the slender Sybo, her face absent looking, abstracted, was pushing aside the drapery of another door.

"Are you prepared, Sybo?" Jaris asked her.

"I am ready. May I have the knife, please?"

Jaris turned to them. "My wife also possesses the ability to receive sensory impressions from inanimate objects." He moved to a table. "The knife," he said. "Do you have it, Captain?"

Startled, Kirk echoed, "The knife? No. I thought…"

"I placed it on this table when we arrived," Jaris said. "It's gone."

There was an uncomfortable silence. It was shattered by a shriek, muffled, but so high-pitched that it penetrated the floor's tiling. The underground room! Kirk and McCoy exchanged the same glance of apprehension. Then Kirk burst into action. Tearing aside a door curtain, he bolted headlong down a flight of stairs, McCoy's feet pounding behind him. They were in an unlit hall, a closed door facing them. Kirk broke through it into a small chamber.

Scott, his eyes closed, was sitting, rigid, in a chair. Karen Tracy, her equipment scattered around her, lay on the floor. McCoy ran to her. But Kirk had seized Scott's shoulder. "Scotty!" he shouted, shaking the shoulder. "Scotty, snap out of it!"

The shoulder sagged under his hand. Scott moaned, swaying, while McCoy, getting to his feet, said, "She's dead, Jim."

Kirk looked at him. "Don't tell me. I know," he said. "She's been stabbed to death, hasn't she?"

"Over and over again," McCoy said. "Just like the other one."

They had to support Scott up the stairs. Jaris poured some amber fluid into a glass and handed it to McCoy. "An Argelian stimulant, Doctor. An effective one." But an overwhelming tension had reclaimed Scott. The glass just clattered against his clenched teeth. It took the combined skills of McCoy and Kirk to pry his locked jaws open and pour the liquid down his throat. As color began to return to his ashen lips, Kirk saw that Sybo had stepped to the altar, a dream-lost look on her face. A nice thing to have—a private dream world, he thought grimly, pouring the rest of the liquor into Scott's mouth. This time he swallowed it voluntarily. Blinking his eyes, he glanced around him. "Lieutenant Tracy?" he said. "Captain—where is…?"

"Lieutenant Tracy is dead," Kirk said.

Scott stared at him. "Dead?"

"Yes," Kirk said harshly. "What happened down there?"

"I was sitting there, sir—and she was taking the readings." He made a move to rise. "Why am I back here now? She wasn't finished."

"That's all you remember?" McCoy asked.

"Scott, *concentrate!*" Kirk said. "The girl is dead. You were with her. You must have seen what happened. What was it?"

The anguished look of helplessness returned to Scott's eyes. "I don't remember. I can't remember, Captain. I must have passed out, but why, if I did…"

McCoy said, "It could be, Jim. The head injury…"

Kirk yelled, "I don't want to hear any more about that head injury! Scott! *Think!*"

"Watch it, Jim," McCoy said. "If he can't think, he can't do it because he's told to."

Kirk swung around to Jaris. "Prefect, is there another door to that room?"

"One that leads into the garden. But it's been locked for years."

"Locks can be picked," McCoy remarked.

"Check it, Bones," Kirk said.

Somewhere a bell rang. Jaris pressed a button, and Hengist, shoving two men before him, pushed through a door curtain. "Prefect," he said, "both of these people were in that café the night of the murder."

Kirk spoke to the older man. "I've seen you. You were one of the café's musicians. You played for Kara."

"She was my daughter," the man said. "She danced to my music as a child. Now she is dead and I am left to grieve." He turned to Jaris. "Prefect, how could this thing happen here? The man who did it must be found. And punished."

Hengist said, "I promise he will be, Tark."

Kirk indicated the younger man. "And *he* left the café just before Scott and Kara."

"Who are you?" Jaris asked the man. "Is what you have just heard true?"

"I am Morla of Cantaba Street. Yes, Prefect. I was there. I have nothing to hide."

"Did you know Kara?" Kirk asked.

Morla nodded. And Tark cried, "Of course he knew her! They were to be married. But his jealousy was a disgust to my child!"

"Jealousy?" Jaris said. "That is disquieting. In Argelius jealousy is virtually unknown."

Morla's mouth trembled. "My jealousy was a sorrow to me, Prefect. But I could not help it. I loved her. When I saw her go to the table with these men, I could not watch. I left the café."

"Where did you go?" Kirk asked.

"Home. Straight to my home. I needed to meditate—to rid myself of anger."

Kirk said, "Prefect, jealousy is a notorious reason for murder."

"I know. That is why it is disapproved here."

"I could not kill." Morla's voice broke. "It is not in me to kill. It is not in me to kill what I loved."

McCoy, returning, took in the scene. "That lock may or may not have been picked, Jim. Even with a tricorder, it would be hard to tell."

Kirk spoke again to Morla. "Can you prove that you went straight home?"

Hengist broke in. "Captain, I insist that you leave this questioning to me!"

"Then get on with it, man!" Kirk shouted. "Don't just hang around!" He looked at Tark. "A father, maybe angered by a daughter's disobedience—you wouldn't be the first one to—" He broke off. "Prefect! A future husband enraged at seeing his girl with other men—you cannot deny that is motive for murder! But Mr Scott had none. Lieutenant Tracy was killed because she was about to discover the truth!"

Jaris's reply came slowly. "That is possible, Captain."

"Probable, sir."

The mild eyes met Kirk's. "Captain, you sound, you know, like a man who's determined to save the life of a friend."

"Yes, sir. Your judgment of me is impeccable. I do want to save my friend. And I remind you that he has not yet been proven guilty."

"Let me remind you that this friend of yours has been found with the body in each of these cases." Hengist's round face had flushed with anger.

Kirk had no time for a further retort, because at that moment Sybo announced, "I am ready, husband."

There was a strange authority in her quiet voice. Nobody spoke as she turned from the altar, her face serene, reposed. "The flame of purification burns," she said. "It points to the direction of truth." She stepped down from the altar. "We shall join hands. Our minds shall mingle—and I shall look into your deep hearts."

With a courtly gesture, Jaris led her to the table. "We shall sit, gentlemen, all of us. And as my wife asks, we shall join hands."

"On one condition, sir," Kirk said. "This room must be sealed so no one can enter or leave it during the ritual."

"The room is sealed," Jaris said.

He was seating Sybo at the table when Kirk's communicator beeped. It was Spock. "May I have a word with you, Captain?"

Kirk turned to Jaris. "A message from my ship, sir. Please excuse me for a moment." He moved to the end of the room. "Yes, Mr Spock?"

"I have been considering the unfortunate situation, sir, as you related it to us. In my opinion, the Argelian empathic contact is a phenomenon worthy of study. I merely wonder if it is sound enough a technique to entrust with a man's life."

"What do you suggest, Mr Spock?"

"That we beam up Mr Scott in order to allow our computers to arrive at the truth."

"Impractical, Mr Spock. To adopt your suggestion could close Argelius as a spaceport. We must respect the emotions and pride of these people. They have their own methods for handling this affair—and while we are here, we are subject to them."

"Understood, Captain."

"I don't like it any more than you do; but there's nothing we can do about it. Kirk out."

When he faced the room again, everyone was seated at the table, Sybo at its head. Behind her the altar flame flared up—and waned. "Let us begin," she said. "Let us join hands. Let the circle not be broken. Look upon the fire that burns on the altar of truth."

Her eyes closed. The odd authority in her low voice now invested her stillness. Kirk saw her lift a rapt face, the room putting shadow into the hollows beneath her cheekbones. Then suddenly, shockingly, she was speaking in a different voice—a much older voice, deeper, resonant. "Yes, there is something here in this room—something terrible—out of the past. I feel its presence—fear, rage, hatred." A groan broke from her. "There is evil here—monstrous, demonic…"

She paused as though all her senses were centered on listening. "A consuming hunger that never dies—hatred of life, of woman, hatred undying." The voice rose. "It is strong—an ancient hunger that feeds on terror—closer, closer—growing among us now—evil lust for death—death. It has been named—boratis—kesla—redjac…"

Sybo's words were coming in a frightened wail. "Devouring evil—eating life, light—hunger that preys—redjac—redjac…"

The altar flame winked out. In the darkness flooding the room, Kirk heard a rushing sound like the flapping of great wings. Then Sybo gave a wild scream.

"Get the lights!" he shouted.

They blazed up. Hengist was over at the light panel, his hand still on it.

But all Kirk had eyes for was Sybo. She was slumped in Scott's arms. Very slowly her body twisted in them. From her back the haft of a long knife protruded. Scott's nerveless arms relaxed—and the body fell to the floor. Scott looked down at it. Then Kirk saw him look away from it to stare at his bloody hands.

Jaris's face was gaunt with grief. And Kirk, listening to Hengist's tirade, thought—and not for the first time—Mr City Administrator,

you are an insensitive man.

"Three murders!" Hengist was yelling. "And this man on the scene each time! What do you require, Captain? That he stab another woman in the back before your very eyes?"

"Mr Hengist, please—not now," Jaris said. "My poor wife—her body has just been removed…"

Hengist persisted. "Prefect, I am perfectly satisfied that this *Enterprise* crewman is guilty!"

"But not responsible," Kirk said. "These acts have been acts of insanity. If Mr Scott is guilty, he is a madman. On our ship we have instruments able to determine his mental state."

"And save his life?" There was a sneer in Hengist's voice.

"Insanity cannot be held responsible under anybody's laws," Kirk said. "It is unaware of what it does to others."

"Gentlemen, please—" Jaris said.

"I am sorry, Prefect," Hengist said. "My heart grieves for you—but I can stand by no longer! This man has killed three times! Even Captain Kirk admits it! But this last-minute attempt to help Scott evade punishment? "

Kirk kept his voice level. "No, Mr Hengist. To see that justice is done."

"I—don't know," Jaris, said.

"How many other murders will occur unless we take prompt action, sir?" Hengist asked him. "The old laws still exist. I can get the truth from this killer."

"By torture?" Kirk said. He turned to Jaris. "Prefect, I told you before, we'll stand by your laws. If Mr Scott is mentally responsible, he is yours to punish. But I must insist that everything possible be done to establish his mental condition."

Jaris's mouth trembled. Shock had visibly aged him. "How could any man do these monstrous things?"

"That is what I hope to find out, sir," Kirk said gently.

With an effort Jaris looked at Scott. "And you, Mr Scott, what do you have to say?"

Scott stood up. "Sir, I swear before God that I did not kill your wife. I have not killed anyone."

"By your own admission you don't know whether you did or not," Hengist said. "Your so-called failure of memory…"

"Mr Hengist," McCoy interrupted him, "aboard our ship it is possible to record all registrations that have been made on

Mr Scott's conscious or subconscious mind. We can recover all that has occurred to him. The recordings are factual. They will tell us exactly what has happened to him in the recent past."

Kirk pressed McCoy's point. "There would be no room for doubt," he said. "We would *know*. Isn't that what we want, Prefect? To *know?*" He looked at Hengist. "The investigation and disposition of the case would still remain in your jurisdiction. What we're after is the removal of doubts."

Hengist's face hardened. "Your suggestion would be illegal. If this man is taken back into your ship with you, what legal assurance do we have you'd return him to Argelius even if your instruments prove him guilty? I have the authority to…"

Jaris had recovered control of himself. "Mr Hengist, the authority is mine," he said firmly. "And this decision, too, is mine." He looked at Kirk. "Captain, as you know, Mr Scott has claimed to remember nothing about the murders. He may have killed without knowing he killed. Can your machines penetrate to the truth of his actions?"

"They will so correlate the facts that a positive conclusion is reached," Kirk said. "No doubts will remain."

Jaris rose. "Very well. We shall go to your ship."

He walked over to Scott, his step steady. "If you are guilty," he said, "you will face the ancient penalties, barbaric though they may be. I warn you that the ancient penalty for murder was death by slow torture. That law has never been changed. Do you understand, Mr Scott?" .

Scott moistened his dry lips. But he faced Jaris unflinchingly. "Aye, sir. I understand."

The Briefing Room of the *Enterprise* was crowded. The Argelian guests, including Tark and Morla, had been seated on one side of its table. On the other side, a pretty yeoman, Tancris, sat between Scott and McCoy, prepared to record the proceedings. Kirk with Spock stood near the computer controls.

Kirk addressed his guests. "Deep in the heart of this ship are our computer banks. They operate the entire ship. They also contain the whole of human and humanoid knowledge. They are indisputably reliable. Our lives depend on them."

He turned to Spock. "Anything to add, Mr Spock?"

"In a matter of a few seconds," Spock said, "we can obtain an answer to any factual question, regardless of its complexity."

"You don't solve a murder with columns of figures!" Hengist said.

"No, sir. But we do determine the truth."

"How?" asked Morla. "That machine can't tell what goes on in a man's mind!"

Kirk pointed to the computer's verifier. "No. But this piece of equipment can—to an extent." He pulled out a chair. "Each testifier will sit here, his hand on this plate. Any deviation from factual truth will be immediately detected. It will then be relayed to the computer which will notify us."

Hengist stirred in his chair. Kirk continued. "Doctor McCoy has already fed his medical reports into the computer. Our laboratory experts are now examining the murder weapon. They will give their findings to the computer for its analysis. Mr Scott, will you please take the stand?"

Scott rose, moved to the verifier, sat down and laid his hand on the plate. Kirk activated the computer control.

"Computer," he said. "Identify and verify."

The mechanism clicked. And the computer voice spoke. "Working. Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott, serial number SE 197547230T. Verified."

"Subject's present physical condition?" Kirk said.

"Working. Subject recently subjected to severe blow on skull. Damage healing. Some peripheral abnormalities."

"Sufficient abnormalities to cause periods of functional amnesia?"

"Working," responded the computer. "Negative."

Puzzled, McCoy intervened. "I don't see how that can be, Jim."

"It can be if Scotty is lying about his loss of memory," Kirk said.

"I'm not lying, Captain!" Scott cried. "I don't remember a thing about the first two murders!"

"Computer. Accuracy scan," said Kirk.

"Subject relaying accurate account. No physiological changes."

Scott, his hand still on the plate, half rose from the chair. "Captain, I never said I blacked out when the Prefect's wife was killed!"

"All right, Scott. Go ahead. What do you remember about it?"

"We were all holding hands. The room was dark, the light from the altar was so dim. I heard the poor lady scream. I tried to reach her—but something was between us."

"Something?" Kirk questioned. "You mean someone?"

"No, sir. Some—thing. Cold—it was cold like a stinking draft out of a slaughterhouse. But—it wasn't really there like—" He stopped, adding lamely, "If you get what I mean."

"Computer?" Kirk said.

"Subject relaying accurate account. No physiological changes."

"All right," said Kirk. "I'm putting it straight. Scott, did you kill Sybo?"

"No," sir. That I'm sure of."

Hengist grunted. "He's been saying that all along. It means no more now than it did before."

Kirk eyed him. "Scotty!" he said. "Lie to me! How old are you?"

"Twenty-two, Captain."

A buzzer sounded. The touch panel blinked a light on and off. And the computer voice said, "Inaccurate. Inaccurate. Data in error."

"Scott, when the lights went out, who was holding your hand?"

"Morla on the one side, sir—you on the other."

Morla, his face pale, got to his feet. "But that doesn't mean anything, Captain. A small room like that—it was dark—anyone of us would have had time to kill the lady."

Hengist was quick to object. "I remind everyone we found Mr Scott holding her in his arms. The knife was still in her back. And there was blood on his hands."

"That is so," Kirk said. "But the verifier has shown it will accept no lie."

"Two other women were murdered," Hengist challenged.

"Mr Scott," Kirk said, "did you kill Kara?"

"I don't remember."

"Did you kill Lieutenant Tracy?"

"I can't remember."

"Computer," Kirk said. "Accuracy scan."

"Subject relaying accurate account. No physiological changes."

"All this proves," Jaris said, "is that he's telling the truth about the memory lapses."

"It's a waste of our time!" Hengist exclaimed.

Kirk said, "Mr Hengist, after this testimony is taken, we will run a psychotricorder analysis of Mr Scott's memory. That's what Lieutenant Tracy was trying to do. This time we'll do it. We shall

have a complete record of the action he took, remembered or forgotten. Will that satisfy you?"

"If you can convince me that the machine is incapable of error. If it shows that he did not kill the women."

"The machine does not err. As to the rest of it, the readings will reveal that. I think you can stand down, Mr Scott—if there are no objections."

"I object to this entire procedure!" Hengist shouted.

Mildly, Jaris turned to him. "Mr Hengist, we are here on my authority."

"Prefect, I know you mean well—but I have had past experience in matters of this kind while you…"

"Enough, sir," Jaris stopped him short. "For the present we will accept Captain Kirk's trust of the machine's accuracy. At the same time we'll reserve the right to make the final determination ourselves."

"That's all we ask, Prefect," Kirk said. "Mr Morla, will you take the stand?"

Morla took it, placing his hand nervously on the touch plate, and Kirk said, "Where were you at the time Kara was murdered?"

"I—I'm not sure. Walking home, I think. I was disturbed." He looked at Kirk. "I told you I felt anger."

"Anger is a relative state, Mr Morla," interposed Spock. "Were you angry enough to do violence?"

"I have never done violence in my life. I am an Argelian. I do not believe I am capable of violence." His voice shook. "Believe me, I couldn't kill her! She loved me!"

Tark jumped to his feet. "That is not true! She did not love him! She told me. He was jealous! They fought constantly!" Tears in his eyes, he turned to Jaris. "My daughter was a true Argelian. A child of joy…"

"Yes, I was jealous!" Morla was on his feet, too. "I admit it! But I did not kill her! I wanted to leave Argelius with her—go somewhere to have her all to myself. I loved her!"

"Did you kill Lieutenant Tracy?" Kirk asked.

"No!"

"Did you kill Sybo?"

"No!"

"Computer—verification scan," Kirk said.

"Subject relaying accurate account. Some statements subjective. No physiological changes."

"That would seem to be it," Kirk said. "You can stand down, Mr Morla."

"He glanced around the faces at the table. After a long moment, he said slowly, "Sybo spoke of a consuming hunger that never dies—of something that thrives on terror, on death." He looked at Spock. "Maybe we're going about this the wrong way. Let's assume that Sybo was a sensitive—that she *did* sense something evil in that room…"

"The sensitivity of certain Argelian women is a documented fact, Captain," Spock said.

"My—dear wife's talent," said Jaris, "was genuine, gentlemen. The things she said were true."

"All right, then," said Kirk. "Exactly what was it she said? A monstrous evil—out of the past—hatred of life, of woman…"

"A lust for death," supplemented McCoy.

"She made some other references that didn't make sense," Kirk said.

"I remember them," McCoy told him. "Redjac. Boratis. Kesla."

Kirk shook his head. "Obscure. Meaningless."

"To us, perhaps, Captain," Spock said. "But to the computer banks…"

"Check them out, Mr Spock."

"Computer, linguistic banks," Spock said. "Definition of following word—redjac."

The computer buzzed. "Working. Negative finding."

"There's no such word in the linguistic bank?"

"Affirmative."

"Scan all other banks," Spock said.

"Working. Affirmative. A proper name."

"Define," Spock said.

"Working. Red Jack. Source: Earth, nineteenth century. Language: English. Nickname applied to mass murderer of women. Other Earth synonym: Jack the Ripper."

A silence composed of shock, hope and incredulity fell over the listeners.

"That's ridiculous!" Hengist yelled. He leaped to his feet. "Jack the Ripper lived hundreds of years ago!"

Kirk said, "Computer. Factual data and capsulization on Jack the Ripper."

"Working. Jack the Ripper: First appearance, London, ancient British Empire, Earth, year 1888, old calendar. Brutal killer of at least six women by knife or surgical instrument; no witnesses to crimes; no identification or arrest. Crimes remain unsolved. No known motive."

"Senseless crimes," McCoy said reflectively.

"As senseless as the murder of Kara—or Lieutenant Tracy," said Kirk.

Tark looked from one to the other. "It can't be. A man could not survive all these centuries."

"My wife," Jaris said. "My wife—before she died—it is a deathless hunger, she said."

"But all men die!" protested Tark.

"All *men* die, sir," Spock said. "But humans and humanoids comprise only, a small percent of the life forms we know of. There exist entities possessed of extremely long lifespans, virtually immortal."

"But—a being which feeds on death?" McCoy shook his head.

"In the strict scientific sense, Doctor, we all live on death—even vegetarians."

"But Sybo said it feeds on terror!"

"Deriving sustenance from emotion is not unknown—and fear is among the strongest and most intense of the emotions."

Hengist's eyes lingered on Spock's quiet face. Then he swung around to Jaris. "Prefect, this has gone far enough! Someone, some man has killed three women. We have the prime suspect in our hands! Are we going to let him go to chase down ghosts?"

"Not ghosts, Mr Hengist," Kirk said. "Possibly not human—but not a ghost. Mr Spock, run a check on the possibilities."

"Computer. Digest log recordings of past five solar minutes. Correlate hypotheses. Compare with life forms register. Question: could such an entity within discussed limits, exist in this galaxy?"

"Affirmative. Examples exist. The Drella of Alpha Carinae V derives its sustenance from the emotion of love. There exists sufficient precedent for existence of creature, nature unknown, which could exist on emotion of terror."

"Extrapolate most likely composition of such entity," Spock said.

"Working. To meet specified requirements, entity would exist without form in conventional sense. Most probable: mass of

energy, highly cohesive."

Kirk took over. "Computer, in such form, could the entity kill with a knife?"

"Negative."

"Could the entity described assume physical form?"

"Affirmative. Precedent: the Mellitus, cloud creature of Alpha Majoris 1."

"Fairy tales!" Hengist was acid with scorn. "Ghosts and goblins!"

Kirk was getting his fill of Hengist. "No, sir," he said. "I've seen the Mellitus myself. Its normal state is gaseous but at rest it becomes solid." He turned back to Spock. "Let's assume the existence of this creature able to take on form or reject it at will. That could explain Scotty's failure to remember anything about the first two murders."

Spock nodded. "Or by production of a hypnotic screen blinding all but the victim to the killer's presence."

Awed, Jaris murmured, "Is that possible?"

"Very possible," McCoy told him. "Even probable. Many examples exist in nature."

"But I don't hypnotize easily," Scott interjected.

"We're not talking about a human hypnotist, Scotty," Kirk reminded him.

Hengist, openly furious, rose again from the table. "This is fantasy! We all know the murderer is sitting right here with us! You're trying to muddy the issue. I've got a mind to stop this right now!"

"Kindly be seated, Mr Hengist." Jaris sounded unusually stern. "The course of this investigation seems valid to me."

Conscious of the glaring Hengist behind him, Kirk said, "What do we have then, Mr Spock? A creature without stable form that feeds on fear, assuming physical shape to do its killing?"

"And preys on women because they are more easily terrorized than the male of the species."

Kirk hit the computer button. "Computer, criminological files. Cases of unsolved multiple murders of women since Jack the Ripper."

"Working. 1932. Shanghai, China, Earth. Seven women knifed to death. 1974. Kiev, USSR, Earth. Five women knifed to death. 2005. Martian Colonies. Eight women knifed to death. Heliopolis, Alpha Proximi II. Ten women knifed to death. There are additional examples."

"Captain," Spock said, "all those places are aligned directly between Argelius and Earth."

"Yes. When men of Earth moved into the galaxy, this thing must have moved with them." He addressed the computer. "Identify the proper names Kesla and Boratis."

"Working. Kesla: popular name of unidentified mass murderer of women on planet Deneb II. Boratis: popular name of unidentified mass murderer of women on planet Rigel IV. Additional data. Murders on Rigel IV occurred one solar year ago."

McCoy turned from the table to look at Kirk. Kirk, nodding, spoke to Hengist. "You came to Argelius from Rigel IV," he said.

"Many people do," Hengist countered. "It's not a crime."

"No. But we are investigating one. Please take the stand, Mr Hengist."

Hengist leaned back in his chair. "I refuse," he said.

"Mr Hengist!"

The jaw in the pudgy face had set hard. "Prefect, I will not take the stand."

"I see your point, sir," Spock said. "If you are the entity we search for, what better hiding place could you find than the official position you hold?"

McCoy was on his feet. "And just after you left Jaris's house, we discovered the murder weapon was missing!"

Kirk pressed on. "You were unaccounted for when Lieutenant Tracy was murdered."

A nerve under Hengist's eye twitched. "The law is my business!" His voice roughened. "You are engaged in sheer speculation for your own illegal ends!"

Kirk was not deferred. "Mr Spock—the weapon."

"Computer," Spock said. "Report on analysis of Exhibit A."

"Working. Exhibit A on visual."

The mechanism's triscreen flashed into brightness. As the image of the knife appeared on it, its voice said, "Composition of blade: boridium. Composition of handle: murinite. Details of handle carving conform to folk art indicating place of origin."

"Specify place of origin," Spock said.

"Artifact produced by hill people of Argus River region, planet Rigel IV."

"Mr Hengist—" Kirk began.

But Hengist had made a break for the door. Scott tripped him—and Kirk closed with him. There was unexpected muscle in the pudgy body. Screaming wildly, Hengist aimed a knee at Kirk's groin. Elbowing up, Kirk swung a fist back and landed a hard right to his jaw. Hengist collapsed. The lights went dim; and at the same moment the room was filled with that rushing sound like the flapping of great wings.

Kirk got to his feet. McCoy, looking up from Hengist's body, said tonelessly, "He's dead, Jim."

"Dead? But that's impossible! A man doesn't die of a sock on the jaw!"

The computer crackled. Then the noise subsided. A maniacal laughter burst from its speakers. They chuckled, choking with obscene merriment—and Hengist's voice shrieked, "Red Jack! Red Jack! Red Jack!"

The cackling mirth grew into an insane howl of triumph. Kirk, astounded, stared at Spock. The Vulcan leaped to the computer buttons. But the mad howls of laughter would not be stilled.

"The computer isn't responding, Captain! The entity has taken possession of it!"

"But the computer controls the ship!" Kirk cried. "Are you saying that this thing is in possession of the ship?"

He himself began to wrestle with the computer controls. Spock tried to move the switch that fed into its bypass circuits. It swung loose. "It's no use, Captain! The bypass circuits have been blocked, too!"

The crazy laughter gushed louder from the speakers. "Red Jack!" it screamed again.

"Audio cutoff, Mr Spock!"

The room was suddenly quiet. But Scott, jumping to his feet, yelled, "The screen, Captain! Look at the screen!"

Kirk whirled. The viewer was a riot of changing colors. Figures began to emerge from them. Serpents writhed through pentagons. Naked women, hair streaming behind them, rode astride the shaggy backs of goats. Horned beasts pranced with toads. Rivers boiled, steaming. Above them, embraced bodies drifted down fiery winds. Human shoulders, pinioned under rocks, lifted pleading arms. Then the red glow, shedding its bloody mist over the screen, gave way to the deathly whiteness of a cold, unending snow. Up from the glacial landscape rose a towering three headed shape, its mouths agape with gusts of silent laughter. A cross, upturned, appeared beside it. The shape crawled up it, suspending itself

upon it in an unspeakable travesty of the crucifixion. Its vast, leathery wings unfolded…

"What is it?" Jaris whispered.

"A vision of hell," Kirk said. He switched off the screen. "This foul thing has shown us the place of its origin. And it is now master of all this ship's operations, including our life support systems."

"You mean it could kill us all?" gasped Morla.

"I suspect it will try," Spock said. "But not immediately." He paused. "It feeds on terror. Death is not enough for it. There are nearly four hundred and forty humans aboard this ship. They offer it an unparalleled opportunity to glut itself on the fear it can stimulate in them. Before it kills, it will make the most of its chance."

Kirk nodded. He moved over to the intercom button. Pressing it, he said, "All hands, this is the Captain speaking. The computers are malfunctioning. Repair efforts are proceeding. Meanwhile, it is of the utmost importance to stay at your posts and remain calm. Captain out."

He faced around. "Bones, what's your sedative situation?"

"I've got some stuff that would tranquilize a volcano, Jim."

"Start distributing it to all hands. The longer we can hold fear down, the more time we'll have to get this hell-born thing out of the computers."

He swung back to Spock. "Mr Spock, you have a compulsory scan order built into your computer control banks."

"Yes, Captain, but with the entity in control…"

"Even so, it will have to deal with everything programmed into the computers. Aren't there some mathematical problems which simply cannot be solved?"

Spock's somber face lightened. "Indeed there are, Captain. If we can focus all the computers' attention on one of them…"

"Good. That should do it." Kirk moved over to the table. "The rest of you, stay here," he said. "Bones, get going on that tranquillizer. Let's go, Mr Spock."

But the thing had taken over the elevator. Though its door slid open to admit Kirk, it started to slam shut before Spock could enter it. "Spock!" Kirk shouted. He grabbed him, yanking him in just as the door clanged shut. Spock turned to regard the door with interest. "Fascinating," he said. "Our friend learns quickly."

"Too quickly." Kirk pushed the up button to the bridge. Instead of rising, the elevator sank. Decks flashed by to a whining sound.

"Free fall!" Kirk yelled. "Put it on manual control!"

They both seized the manual controls, pulling at them. The whine stopped, and very slowly the elevator began to rise. Then its alarm siren shrieked. "That was due to be next," Kirk said grimly. "Life support malfunction!"

"We don't have much time, Captain."

"You said it yourself, Mr Spock. It wants terror. Death comes second on its list."

The elevator stopped at the bridge deck, but there was another struggle with its touch plate to get its door open. Nor did they find much cause for cheer as they hurried out of it into the bridge. Sulu, already gasping for breath, was with the technician at the life support station. "Captain, the override is jammed!"

Spock ran to the station. Ripping off a panel, he exposed its mechanism, and kneeling, went to work on it. He was reaching for a tool when Hengist's voice screamed from the bridge speaker. "You are all about to die! Captain Kirk, you are wasting your time!" The voice broke again into its hideous laughter.

"Turn that off, Communications!" Kirk wheeled to Sulu. "Man your post, Mr Sulu! Prepare all your manual overrides!"

Spock got to his feet. "Normal environmental levels restored, Captain. But, as you know, they won't last long. Several hours with luck."

Sulu asked, "What's going on, Captain?"

"Man your post, Mr Sulu!" Kirk, aware of his tension, hastened to meet the nurse who was stepping out of the elevators air hypo in hand. "Is that the tranquilizer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Everyone, including yourself."

The Communications technician had bared his arm for the shot when Hengist's voice spoke once more.

"You cannot stop me now, Captain!" Kirk reached over the crewman's shoulder to push buttons, but the voice wasn't hushed. "Fool, you cannot silence me! I control all the circuits of this ship! You cannot reach me! Your manual overrides' life is as limited as your own. Soon all controls will be mine!"

Kirk moved over to Spock at his computer station. He said softly, "Well, Mr Spock?"

"Work proceeding, Captain."

This time Kirk raised his voice. "Destroy us—and you destroy yourself."

Chuckles bubbled from the bridge speaker. "I am deathless. I have existed from the dawn of time—and I shall live beyond its end. In the meantime I shall feed—and this time I need no knife. In pain unspeakable you will all die!"

Spock looked up from his work. "It is preparing its feast on terror."

"Imbeciles! I can cut off your oxygen and suffocate you! I can crush you all by increasing atmospheric pressure! I can heighten the temperature till the blood boils in your veins!"

Sulu had received his shot. He turned to Kirk. "Captain," he said cheerfully, "whoever that is, he sure talks gloomy."

"Yes. Stay at your post, Mr Sulu. If any more systems go out, switch to manual override. Above all, don't be afraid."

"With an arm full of this stuff, sir, I wouldn't be scared of a supernova."

"Ready, Captain," Spock said.

"Implement."

Spock addressed his library computer. "This is a compulsory Class 1 direction. Compute to the last digit the value of pi."

Sharp clicks mingled with an outbreak of buzzing noises. Spock waited. And what he waited for came. Over the speaker Hengist's voice, alarmed, said, "No—not…"

Spock made his reply. "The value of pi is a transcendental number without any resolution. All banks of our computer are now working on it to the exclusion of all else. They will continue to calculate this incalculable number until we order them to stop."

"Let's get back to the Briefing Room," Kirk said. "The Argelians will probably be the first to panic."

Sulu watched them go to the elevator. Then he said happily to himself, "I wonder what I'm supposed to be afraid of."

In the Briefing Room, the body of Hengist was still slumped in the chair where it had been placed. McCoy was circling the table administering the tranquilizer shots. As Kirk and Spock entered, Scott said, "Well, Captain?"

"I don't think our computers will be inhabited by anything but a bunch of figures for a while."

Spock had gone directly to the computer controls. He tested them. "There's some resistance, Captain, but the directive is succeeding. Bank after bank is turning to the problem."

McCoy paused, his air hypo suspended. "If you drive it out of the computer, Jim, it will have to go somewhere else."

"I doubt if it will move into anyone who's been tranquilized, Bones. How're you coming?"

"Almost finished. Just Jaris and me…"

He stopped dead. The lights had dimmed again. And there was that rushing sound of vast wings beating. Very gradually, the lights returned. Spock punched a button on the computer controls.

"The entity has fled, Captain," he said.

Kirk had been pondering McCoy's warning. "But where has it fled? Bones—if the thing entered a tranquilized body, what would happen?"

"It might take up knitting," McCoy said. "But nothing more violent than that."

"And you say everyone has had a shot except you—and Jaris?"

Jaris turned in his chair. "You and Mr Spock have received no shot, Captain."

Kirk looked at him sharply. "That is true. But I know it is not in me—and I'm willing to take a chance on Mr Spock. Bones, give yourself a shot."

"I ought to stay clear to keep my wits about me," McCoy protested.

"I gave you an order, Bones!"

McCoy stared at Kirk. Then he shrugged, bared his arm and plunged the hypo into it.

"Prefect," Kirk said, "if you will extend your arm, please…"

Jaris exploded into an insane howl. Out of his mouth Hengist's voice screamed, "*No! No!*" Leaping from the table, Jaris flung himself on Kirk. Spock raced over to them. The elderly body of Jaris was infused with unbelievable strength. It had Kirk by the throat. Spock tore it away. It shrieked, "Kill! Kill you all! Suffer, suffer! Die!" Grappling with Jaris's fiercely powerful body, Spock reached for its neck to apply the Vulcan pinch. Jaris crumpled. And once again the lights dimmed—the vast wings flapped.

Kirk regained his feet. Around the table its tranquilized people, some sitting, some standing, were smiling as though the struggle had been staged for their entertainment. Yeoman Tancris, her recording pad dropped to the floor, was regarding Spock with a beautiful admiration. From behind her an arm reached out. It encircled her neck, pulling her backward. Hengist's body had left its chair. It whipped out a knife and laid it against the girl's throat.

"Stand away—or I'll kill her!" it said.

McCoy, thoroughly tranquilized, said mildly, "You'll hurt somebody with that knife," and extended a gentle hand toward the weapon. Hengist took a savage swipe at him. Spock jumped him as Kirk ripped the hypo from McCoy. Spock, closing with the howling madman, managed to tear his sleeve. Kirk rammed the hypo home. Hengist wavered in Spock's grasp. "I'll kill you all," he said quietly. "And you shall suffer and I shall feed—" He collapsed.

Kirk grabbed his shoulders. "The Transporter Room! Quickly!" he shouted to Spock.

The Transporter technician beamed at them happily as they staggered into the room, the heavy body of Hengist between them.

Kirk yelled, "Deep space—widest angle of dispersion—full power —maintain…"

The Transporter Chief looked at him reproachfully. "No need to get so excited, Captain. I'll take care of it."

"Spock! Do it! Tranquilizers have their limitations!"

Alone, Kirk placed Hengist on the platform. The benevolent Transporter Chief was moving casually toward the console when Spock pushed him aside and seized the controls.

"Energize!" Kirk shouted.

The motionless figure on the platform broke up into sparkle—and was gone.

Spock, his elbow on the console, leaned his head on his hand. Kirk laid a hand on his shoulder. "Quite an expensive little foray into the fleshpots—our visit to Argelius," he said. But the Transporter Chiefs feelings were hurt. "You didn't have to shove me, Mr Spock. I'd have gotten around to it," he said pleasantly. He looked up as Scott and McCoy, both grinning contentedly, opened the door. "Now there are two officers who know how to take life—easy," he said.

"Jaris will be all right," McCoy announced soothingly.

"What did you do with the thing, Captain?" Scott asked. "Send it back to the planet?"

"No, Scotty. We beamed it out into open space at the widest possible dispersion angle."

"But it can't die!" McCoy said.

"Perhaps not, Doctor," Spock said. "Indeed, its consciousness may survive for some time, but only in the form of billions of particles, separate bits of energy, forever drifting in space—powerless, shapeless and without sustenance. We know it must eat to remain alive."

"And it will never feed again, not in the formless state it's in," Kirk said. "Finally, it will die." He looked at McCoy. "Bones—how long before that tranquilizer wears off?"

"Oh, five or six hours, I guess. I certainly have given everyone a pretty good dose."

"So I notice. Well, Mr Spock, for the next few hours we'll have the happiest crew in space. But I doubt that we get much work done."

"Sir," Spock said, "since, after all, we came to Argelius to rest, I see no reason why we shouldn't take advantage of it."

"Let's go!" Scott cried enthusiastically.

"Shore leave, Mr Scott? You and Dr McCoy have still to sleep off the effects of the last one. But we?" Kirk turned to Spock. "Mr Spock, want to make the rounds of the Argelian fleshpots with me?"

Spock's eyebrows rose. "Captain," he said stiffly, "I spoke of rest."

"Ah," Kirk said. "So you did. My mistake, Mr Spock."

THE CHANGELING

(John Meredyth Lucas)

The last census had shown the Malurian system, which had two habitable planets, to have a population of over four billion; and only a week ago, the *Enterprise* had received a routine report from the head of the Federation investigating team there, asking to be picked up. Yet now there was no response from either planet, on any channel—and a long-range sensor sweep of the system revealed no sign of life at all.

There could not have been any system-wide natural catastrophe, or the astronomers would have detected it, and probably even predicted it. An interplanetary war would have left a great amount of radioactive residue; but the instruments showed only normal background radiation. As for an epidemic, what disease could wipe out two planets in a week, let alone so quickly that not even a single distress signal could be sent out—and what disease could wipe out *all* forms of life?

A part of the answer came almost at once as the ship's deflector screens snapped on. Something was approaching the *Enterprise* at multi-warp speed: necessarily, another ship. Nor did it leave a moment's doubt about its intentions. The bridge rang to a slamming jar. The *Enterprise* had been fired upon.

"Shields holding, Captain," Scott said.

"Good."

"I fear it is a temporary condition," Spock said. "The shields absorbed energy equivalent to almost ninety of our photon torpedos."

"*Ninety,* Mr Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. I may add, the energy used in repulsing that first attack has reduced our shielding power by approximately 20 percent. In other words, we can resist perhaps three more; the fourth one will get through."

"Source?"

"Something very small… bearing 123 degrees mark 18. Range, ninety thousand kilometers. Yet the sensors still do not register any life forms."

"Nevertheless, we'll try talking. They obviously pack more wallop than we do. Lieutenant Uhura, patch my audio speaker into the translator computer and open all hailing frequencies."

"Aye, sir… All hailing frequencies open."

"To unidentified vessel, this is Captain Kirk of the *USS Enterprise.* We are on a peaceful mission. We mean no harm to you or to any life-form. Please communicate with us." There was no answer. "Mr Spock, do you have any further readings on the alien?"

"Yes, sir. Mass, five hundred kilograms. Shape, roughly cylindrical. Length, a fraction over one meter."

"Must be a shuttlecraft," Scott said. "Some sort of dependent ship, or a proxy."

Spock shook his head. "There is no other ship on the sensors. The object we are scanning is the only possible source of the attack."

"What kind of intelligent creatures could exist in a thing that size?"

"Intelligence does not necessarily require bulk, Mr Scott."

"Captain, message coming in," Uhura said.

The voice that came from the speaker was toneless, inflectionless, but comprehensible. "*USS Enterprise,* This is Nomad. My mission is non-hostile. Require communication. Can you leave your ship?"

"Yes," Kirk said, "but it will not be possible to enter your ship because of size differential."

"*Non sequitur,*" said Nomad. "Your facts are uncoordinated."

"We are prepared to beam you aboard our ship.

Kirk's officers, except for Spock, reacted with alarm at this, but Nomad responded, "That will be satisfactory."

"Do you require any special conditions, any particular atmosphere or environment?"

"Negative."

"Please maintain your position. We are locked on to your coordinates and will beam you aboard." Kirk made a throat-cutting gesture to Uhura, who broke the contact.

"Captain," Scott said, "you're really going to bring that thing in here?"

"While it's on board, Mr Scott, I doubt very much if it will do any more shooting at us. And if we don't do what it asks, we're a sitting duck for it right now. Lieutenant Uhura, have Dr McCoy report to the Transporter Room. Mr Spock, Scotty, come with me."

The glowing swirl of sparkle that was the Transporter effect died, and Nomad was there, a dull metallic cylinder, resting in a horizontal position on the floor of the chamber. It was motionless, silent, and a little absurd. There were seams on its sides, indicating possible openings, but there were no visible ports or sensors.

Spock moved to a scanning station, then shook his head. "No sensor readings, Captain. It has some sort of screen which protects it. I cannot get through."

There was a moment's silence. Then McCoy said: "What do we do now? Go up and knock?"

As if in answer, the flat inflectionless voice of Nomad spoke again, now through the ship's intercom system. "Relate your point of origin."

Kirk said, "We are from the United Federation of Planets."

"Insufficient response. All things have a point of origin. I will scan your star charts."

Kirk thought about this for a moment, then turned to Spock. "We can show it as a closeup of our system. As long as it has nothing to relate to, it won't know anything more important than it does now."

"It seems a reasonable course," Spock said.

"Nomad," Kirk told the cylinder, "If you would like to leave your ship, we can provide the necessary life-support systems."

"*Non sequitur.* Your facts remain uncoordinated."

"Jim," said McCoy, "I don't believe there's anyone in there."

"I contain no parasitical beings. I am Nomad."

"Och, it's a machine!" Scott said, brightening.

"Opinion, Mr, Spock?"

"Indeed, Captain, it is reacting quite like a highly sophisticated computer."

"I am Nomad. What is 'opinion'?"

"Opinion," Spock said, "is a belief, view or judgment."

"Insufficient response."

"What's your source of power?" Scott said.

"It has changed since the point of origin. There was much taken from the other. Now I focus cosmic radiation, and am perpetual."

Kirk drew Spock aside and spoke in a low voice. "Wasn't there a probe called Nomad launched from Earth back in the early two thousands?"

"Yes. It was reported destroyed. There were no more in the series. But if this *is* that probe—"

"I will scan your star charts now," Nomad said.

"We'll bring them."

"I have the capability of movement within your ship."

After a moment's hesitation, Kirk said, "This way. Scotty, get our shields recharged as soon as possible. Spock, Bones, come with me."

He led the way to the auxiliary control room, Nomad floating after him. The group considerably startled a crewman who was working there.

Spock crossed to the console. "Chart fourteen A, sir?"

Kirk nodded. The First Officer touched buttons quickly, and a view-screen lit up, showing a schematic chart of Earth's solar system—not, of course, to scale.

"Nomad," Kirk said, "can you scan this?"

"Yes."

"This is our point of origin. A star we know as Sol."

"You are from the third planet?"

"Yes."

"A planet with one large natural satellite?"

"Yes."

"The planet is called Earth?"

"Yes it is," Kirk said, puzzled.

An antenna slid from the side of the cylinder, swiveled, and centered upon him. He eyed it warily.

"Then," said Nomad,, "you are the Creator—the Kirk. The sterilization procedure against your ship was a profound error."

"What sterilization procedure?"

"You know. You are the Kirk—the Creator. You programmed my function."

"Well, I'm not the Kirk," McCoy said. "Tell *me* what your function is."

The antenna turned to center on the surgeon. "This is one of your units, Creator?"

"Uh… yes, he is."

"It functions irrationally."

"Nevertheless, tell him your function."

The antenna retracted. "I am sent to probe for biological infestations. I am to destroy that which is not perfect."

Kirk turned to Spock, who was working at an extension of the library computer. "Biological infestations? There never was any probe sent out for that."

"I am checking its history," Spock said. "I should have a read-out in a moment,"

Kirk turned back to Nomad. "Did you destroy the Malurian system? And why?"

"Clarify."

"The system of this star, Omega Ceti."

"Not the system, Creator Kirk, only the unstable biological infestation. It is my function."

"Unstable manifestation!" McCoy said angrily. "The population of two planets!"

"Doctor," Kirk said warningly. "Nomad, why do you call me Creator?"

"Is the usage incorrect?"

"The usage is correct," Spock put in quickly. "The Creator was simply testing your memory banks."

What, Kirk wondered, was Spock on to now? Well, best keep silent and play along.

"There was much damage in the accident," Nomad said.

Kirk turned toward the crewman, who had been listening with growing amazement. "Mr Singh, come over here, please. Mr Spock, Doctor, go to the briefing room. Nomad, I will return shortly. This unit, called Singh, will see to your needs."

There was no reaction from the cylinder. Kirk joined Spock and McCoy in the corridor. "Spock, you're on to something. What is it?"

"A Nomad probe was launched from Earth in August of the year 2002, old calendar. I am convinced that this is the same probe."

"Ridiculous," McCoy said. "Earth science couldn't begin to build anything with those capabilities that long ago."

"Besides," Kirk added, "Nomad was destroyed."

"*Presumed* destroyed by a meteor collision," Spock said. "I submit that it was badly damaged, but managed somehow to repair itself. But what is puzzling is that the original mission was a peaceful one." They had reached the briefing room, and the First Officer stepped aside to allow Kirk to precede him in. "The creator of Nomad was perhaps the most brilliant, though erratic, cyberneticist of his time. His dream was to make a perfect thinking machine, capable of independent logic. His name was Jackson Roykirk."

Light dawned. "Oho," Kirk said.

"Yes, Captain, I believe Nomad thinks you are Roykirk, and that may well be why the attack was broken off when you hailed it. It responded to your name, as well as its damaged memory banks permitted. While we were in Auxiliary Control, I programmed the computer to show a picture of the original Nomad on the screen here."

Spock switched on the screen. On it appeared, not a photograph, but a sketch. The size and shape indicated were about the same as the present Nomad, but the design was somehow rougher.

"But that's not the same," McCoy said.

"Essentially it is, Doctor. But I believe more happened to it than just damage in the meteor collision. It mentioned 'the other'. The other *what* is still an unanswered question. Nomad was a thinking machine, the best that could be engineered. It was a prototype. However, the entire program was highly controversial. It had many powerful enemies in the confused and inefficient Earth culture of that time. When Jackson Roykirk died, the Nomad program died with him."

"But if it's Nomad," Kirk said, "what happened to alter its shape?"

"I think it somehow repaired the damage it sustained."

"Its purpose must have been altered. The directive to seek out and destroy biological infestations couldn't have been programmed into it."

"As I recall, it wasn't," McCoy said. "Seems to me it was supposed to be the first interstellar probe to seek out new life-forms—only."

"Precisely, Doctor," Spock said. "And somehow that programming has been changed. It would seem that Nomad is now seeking out

perfect life-forms… perfection being measured by its own relentless logic."

"If what you say is true, Mr Spock," Kirk said, "Nomad has effectively programmed itself to destroy all non-mechanical life."

"Indeed, Captain. We have taken aboard our vessel a device which, sooner or later, must destroy us."

"Bridge to Captain Kirk," said the intercom urgently.

"Here, Scotty."

"Sir, that mechanical beastie is up here on the bridge!"

"On my way." Kirk tried to remember whether or not he, as the misidentified "Creator," had given Nomad a direct order to stay in the auxiliary control room. Evidently not.

On the bridge Uhura, Scott and Sulu were on duty; Uhura had been singing softly to herself.

"I always liked that song," Sulu said.

As he spoke, the elevator doors opened, and Nomad emerged. It paused for a moment, antenna extended and swiveling, coming to rest at last on Uhura. It started towards her. (It was at this point that Scott had called for Kirk.)

"What is the meaning of that?" Nomad said. "What form of communication?"

Uhura stared; though she knew the device had been brought aboard, this was the first time she had actually seen it. "I don't know what you—oh, I was singing."

"For what purpose is this singing?"

"I don't know. Just because I felt like singing, felt like music."

"What is music?"

Uhura started to laugh—there was something inherently ludicrous about discussing music with a machine—but the laugh died quickly. "Music is a pleasant arrangement of musical tones—sound vibrations of various frequencies, purer than those used in normal speech, and with associated harmonics. It can be immensely more complex than what I was doing just then."

"What is its purpose?"

Uhura shrugged helplessly. "Just for enjoyment."

"Insufficient response," said the machine. A pencil of light shot out from it, resting a spot of light on her forehead, between and slightly above the eyes. "Think about music."

Uhura's face went completely blank. Scott lunged to his feet. "Lieutenant! Get away from that thing—"

The elevator doors opened and Kirk, Spock and McCoy entered. "Scotty, look out—" Kirk shouted.

Scott had already reached the machine and grabbed for it, as if to shove it out of the way. There was no movement or effect from the craft, but the engineer was picked up and flung with tremendous impact against the nearest bulkhead. Sulu leapt up to yank Uhura out of the beam of light.

Kirk gestured toward Scott and McCoy strode to him quickly and knelt. Then he looked up. "He's dead, Jim."

For a moment Kirk stood stunned and appalled.

Then fury rose to free him from his paralysis. "Why did you kill him?" he asked Nomad grimly.

"That unit touched my screens."

"That *unit* was my chief engineer." He turned to Uhura. "Lieutenant, are you all right?… Lieutenant!… Dammit, Nomad, what did you do to *her?*"

"This unit is defective. Its thinking was chaotic. Absorbing it unsettled my circuitry."

"The unit is a woman," Spock said.

"A mass of conflicting impulses."

Kirk turned angrily away. "Take Mr Scott below."

"The Creator will effect repairs on the unit Scott?"

"He's dead."

"Insufficient response."

"His biological functions have ceased." Kirk was only barely able to control his rage and sorrow.

"If the Creator wishes," Nomad said emotionlessly, "I will repair the unit."

Startled, Kirk looked at McCoy, who said, "There's nothing I can do, Jim. But if there's a chance, it'll have to be soon."

"All right. Nomad, repair the unit."

"I require tapes on the structure."

Spock looked to McCoy. The surgeon said, "It'll need tapes on general anatomy, the central nervous system, one on the physiological structure of the brain. We'd better give it all the neurological studies we have. And tracings of Scotty's electro-encephalogram."

Spock nodded and punched the commands into the library computer as McCoy called off the requirements. "Ready, Nomad."

The device glided forward. A thin filament of wire extruded from it and touched a stud on the panel. Spock tripped a toggle and the computer whirred.

Then it was over and the filament pulled back into Nomad. "An interesting structure. But, Creator, there are so few safeguards built in. It can break down from innumerable causes, and its self-maintenance systems are unreliable."

"It serves me as it is, Nomad," Kirk said.

"Very well, Creator. Where is the unit Scott now?"

"Bones, take it to Sickbay." Kirk snapped a switch and said into his mike, "Security. Twenty-four hour two-man armed surveillance on Nomad. Pick it up in Sickbay." He turned to Spock. "Nomad is operating on some kind of energy. We've got to find out what it is and put a damper on it. Surely it can't be getting much cosmic radiation inside the *Enterprise;* we're well shielded. Let's feed in everything that's happened so far to the computer, and program for a hypothesis."

"It seems the most reasonable course, Captain. But it won't be easy."

"Easy or not, I want it done. Get on it, Mr Spock. Then report to me in Sickbay."

Scott's body lay upon the examination table, with Nomad hovering over it. McCoy and Nurse Christine Chapel stood beside it, while Kirk and the two Security guards stood near the wall. Nomad, antenna extended, was scanning the body and humming.

The nurse looked toward the body-functions panel. "No reaction, Doctor."

"Could have told you that without looking, Nurse."

Suddenly, a tight appeared on the panel, and a dial began quivering. In time with its movements, there came a steady beeping sound, gradually picking up in speed and volume.

Scott's eyes opened and he looked up at the amazed group, frowning. While he stared back, Spock joined the others. "What are the lot of you staring at?" Scott demanded.

"I… don't… believe it," McCoy whispered.

Scott looked around, and spotting Nomad, its antenna retracted now, he sat up in alarm. "What am I doing here? How did I—That

thing did something to Lieutenant Uhura—”

“She’s being taken care of, Scotty,” Kirk said.

“But sir, it’s dangerous! It—”

“Take it easy, Scotty,” McCoy said. “Now just lie down. I want to check you out.”

“The unit Scott is repaired,” Nomad said. “It will function as before if your information to me was correct.”

“How about it, Bones? Can he go back to duty?”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll check him out first A man isn’t just a… a biological unit to be patched together.”

“What did it do to me?” Scott said.

Suddenly, a wave of pure awe, as strong as any he had ever felt in his life, swept through Kirk. Back from the dead! Why, if—but he pushed speculation resolutely away for the time being. “Dr McCoy will explain, Scotty.”

“Nurse Chapel,” McCoy said, “I want him prepared for a full physical exam.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kirk crossed the examination room toward Sickbay proper, where Uhura now was. “Nomad, come here.”

The machine glided after him, followed by Spock and McCoy. Inside, the Communications Officer lay unmoving on a bed, in a hospital gown and covered by a blanket. She did not look at any of them.

“Can you repair her, Nomad?” Kirk demanded.

“No,” said the machine.

“But you were able to restore Scott, who had much more extensive damage.”

“That was simply physiological repair. This one’s superficial knowledge banks have been, wiped clean.”

“Superficial? Be more specific.”

“She still remembers her life experiences, but her memory of how to express them, either logically or in the illogic called music, or to act on them, has been purged.”

“Captain, if that is correct,” Spock said, “if her mind has not been damaged and the aphasia is that superficial, she could be taught again.”

“Bones?”

“I’ll get on it right away.” McCoy swung on Nomad. “And despite the way you repaired Scotty, you ticking metal—”

"Does the Creator wish Nomad to wait elsewhere?" Spock broke in quickly.

"Yes. Guards! Nomad, you will go with these units. They will escort you to a waiting area. Guards, take it to the top security cell in the brig."

There was silence while the guards and the machine went out. Then Spock said, "I interrupted you, Doctor, because Nomad would not have understood your anger. Its technical skill is great but it seems to react violently to emotion, even so non-specific an emotion as the enjoyment of music. It almost qualifies as a life-form itself."

Kirk glanced sharply at him. "It's all right to admire it, Mr Spock, but remember it's a killer. We're going to have to handle it."

"I agree, Captain. It is a remarkable construction; it may well be the most advanced machine in the known galaxy. Study of it—"

"I intend to render it harmless, whatever it may take."

"You mean destroy it, Captain?"

"If it's necessary," Kirk said. "Get down to the brig with your equipment and run a full analysis of the mechanism. I want to know what makes that thing tick."

"Yes, sir."

The First Officer went out, and Kirk and McCoy returned to the examination room. Scott was still lying on the table. McCoy scanned the body functions panel slowly, and shook his head in disbelief.

"He checks out fine," he said. "Everything's normal."

"Then," Scott said, "can I get back to my engines, sir?"

Kirk glanced at McCoy, who nodded. "All right, Scotty."

"I hate to admit it," McCoy said as Scott swung off the table and left, "but Spock was right. Nomad is a remarkable machine."

"Just remember it kills as effectively as it heals, Bones… if I'm called, I'll be down in the brig."

The two Security guards, phasers in hand, stood outside the force-field door of the brig, which was on. Inside, Nomad floated, almost surrounded by an array of portable scanners, behind which was Spock, staring with disapproval at the machine. Nomad, its antenna out, "stared" back.

One of the guards switched off the screen to allow Kirk to enter, then switched it on again. Kirk said, "What's the problem?"

"I have been unable to convince Nomad to lower its screens for analysis. Without its cooperation, I can do nothing."

Kirk studied the quietly humming machine. "Nomad, you will allow Spock to probe your memory banks and structure."

"This Spock is also one of your biological units, Creator?"

"Yes."

"This unit is different. It is well ordered. Interesting."

Under other circumstances, Kirk would have been amused to hear a machine applying Spock's favorite word to Spock himself, but the stakes were too great for amusement now. "Follow your orders, Nomad."

"My screens are down. You may proceed."

Spock set to work, very rapidly indeed, making settings, taking readings, making new settings. Within a few moments, he seemed to have found something which surprised him. He made another adjustment, and the machine he had been using promptly extruded a slip of paper, which he studied.

"Captain, I suggest we go out in the corridor for a private conference." They did so. "Sir, I have formed a partial hypothesis. But my information is insufficient and I have gleaned everything possible from the scanners. I must be allowed to question Nomad directly."

"Too dangerous."

"Captain, it moves only against imperfections. As you will recall, there is a Vulcan mind discipline which permits absolute concentration on one subject for a considerable period of time. If I were to use it—"

"And if your mind wandered for a moment, Nomad might just blast you out of existence. Right now it's safe in the brig."

"We do not know enough about it to know if it is 'safe' anywhere. If my hypothesis is correct, sir, we will at least be closer to understanding it. And control is not possible without understanding."

"All right," Kirk said, taking a phaser from one of the guards, "but I think I'll just keep this handy."

They went back in. Spock sat down on the cell bunk, for which the present prisoner had no use, and put his fingers to his temple. Kirk could almost hear his mind working.

"Nomad, my unit Spock will ask you certain questions. You will answer them as though I were asking them myself."

"Yes, Creator."

Silence. At last Spock said, "Nomad, there was an accident."

"There was an accident."

"You encountered the other."

"There was another. It was without direction. We joined."

"The other was not of the Earth. Its functions were other than yours." Spock held up the piece of paper, on which Kirk could see a drawing of what looked to be a space capsule of unfamiliar design. "I secured this design from your memory banks. Is this the other?"

"It is the other."

"Nomad, your memory banks were damaged by the accident. You took new directions from the other."

There was a buzz from the machine, and an antenna was aimed at Spock again. "Your statement is not recorded. You are in error."

"Logically, Nomad, you cannot prove I am in error, if your memory banks were damaged. You would have no way of knowing whether I speak the truth or not." Spock fell silent. The antenna retracted. "You acknowledge my logic. After meeting with the other, you had a new directive. Life-forms, if not perfect, are to be sterilized. Is this correct?"

"That is my programmed purpose."

"How much of the other did you assimilate?"

"Unrelated. Your question has no factual basis."

"Spock," Kirk said, "I think you're getting into deep waters. Better knock off."

Spock, unhearing, continued to stare at Nomad. The machine said: "There is error here. But if there was damage to my memory cells, there can be no proof of error. I will consider it."

"Enough," Kirk said firmly. Signaling to the guards to drop the screen, he dragged Spock out. The Vulcan was still glassy-eyed. "Mr Spock! Come out of it!"

Slowly Spock's eyes began to focus. "Yes, Captain?"

"Are you all right?"

"Quite all right, sir." He looked back into the brig. "Fascinating. I was correct. It did meet a completely alien probe in deep space."

"And they merged—or at least their purposes did."

"In effect. Nomad took the alien's prime purpose to replace that part of its own which had been destroyed. The alien was originally

programmed to seek out and sterilize soil samples from various planets—possibly as a preliminary to colonization."

"Hmm. Spock, do you know what a changeling is?"

"Sir?"

"An ancient Earth legend. A changeling was supposed to be a fairy child left in place of a stolen human baby. The changeling took the identity of the human child."

"That would be a parallel if Nomad is actually the alien probe intact. But actually, its programming now is a combination of the two. Nomad was supposed to find new life-forms; the alien to find and sterilize soil samples; the combination, and a deadly one, is to seek out and sterilize all life-forms. Moreover, the highly advanced alien technology, plus Nomad's own creative thinking, has enabled it to evolve itself into the incredibly powerful and sophisticated machine it is now."

"Not so sophisticated, Spock. It thinks I'm its… its father."

"Apparently Roykirk had enough ego to build a reverence for himself into the machine. That has been transferred to you—and so far it has been all that has saved us."

"Well, we'd better see to it that it never loses that reverence, Spock."

They were just about to enter an elevator when an intercom squalled with alarm. "Captain Kirk! This is Engineering! That alien device is down here, fooling with the anti-matter pod controls. We're up to Warp Ten now and can't stop!"

"Impossible! She won't go that fast."

"Warp Eleven now, sir."

"I'll be right down. Mr Spock, check the brig."

The Engineering section was filled with the terrifying whine of the overdriven warp engines. Nomad was floating in front of the control panels, on which all the telltales glowed red.

Kirk rushed to the panel. "Nomad, you will stop whatever you're doing."

"Is there a problem, Creator? I have increased conversion efficiently by 57 percent—"

"You will destroy my ship. Its structure cannot stand the stress of that much power. Shut down your repair operation!"

"Acknowledged."

The whine began to die, and the panel returned to normal, the red lights blinking out one by one.

"It is reversed, as you ordered, Creator."

Spock entered the section and came up to Kirk. "Captain, I have examined the brig. The force-field generator of the security-cell door has been burnt out, and the guards have vanished. I must assume they are dead. I have asked for two more; they are outside."

"Creator, your mechanical units are as inefficient as your biological specimens."

"Nomad," Kirk said grimly, "it's time you were reminded of exactly who and what you are. I am a biological specimen—and you acknowledge that I built you."

"True," said the machine. "*Non sequitur.* Biological specimens are inherently inferior. This is an inconsistency."

"There are two men waiting outside. You will not harm them. They will escort you back to the waiting area. You will stay there. You will do nothing."

"I am programmed to investigate," Nomad said.

"I have given you new programming. You will implement it."

"There is much to be considered before I return to launch point. I must re-evaluate." Lifting, the machine floated away through the door, through which the red shirts of two more Security guards could be seen.

"Re-evaluate?" Kirk said.

"Captain," said Spock, "it may have been unwise to admit to Nomad you were a biological specimen. In Nomad's eyes you will undoubtedly now appear as imperfect as all the other biological specimens. I suspect that it is about to re-evaluate its Creator."

Scott, having seen that his board had been put back to rights, had come over to them in time to catch the last sentence. He said, "Will we be any worse off than we are now?"

"Scotty, it's just killed two men," Kirk said. "We've got to find a way to protect the crew."

"Captain, it is even more serious," Spock said. "Nomad just made a reference to its launch point. Earth."

A horrible thought struck Kirk. "Spock, is there any chance Nomad got a navigational fix on Earth while tapping our computers earlier?"

"I don't believe there is much beyond Nomad's capabilities, sir."

"Then we showed it the way home! And when it gets there—"

Spock nodded. "It will find the Earth infested with inferior biological specimens—just as was the Malurian system."

"And it will carry out its new prime directive. Sterilize!"

As they stared at each other, McCoy's amplified voice boomed out. "Captain Kirk! Captain Kirk to Sickbay! Emergency!"

This, Kirk thought, is turning into a continuous nightmare. He ran, Spock at his heels.

At the door of the examination room, Kirk hammered on the touchplate. It did not open. As Spock turned down the corridor to actuate the manual controls, however, the door suddenly slid back and Nomad emerged.

"Nomad! Stop!"

The machine paid no heed, but went on down the corridor. It passed Spock on the way, but ignored him too. In a moment it had vanished.

In the examination room, Christine lay unconscious on the floor. McCoy was bending over her with his medical tricorder.

"Is she all right, Bones?"

"I think so, Jim. Looks like some kind of shock."

"What happened?"

"Nomad examined the personnel files. The medical records. She tried to stop it."

"Whose medical history?"

"Yours, Jim."

"Since it specifically examined your history, Captain," Spock said, "I would suggest that it has carried out its re-evaluation."

"And," Kirk said grimly, "confirmed that its Creator is as imperfect as the rest of the biological specimens."

"Bridge to Captain Kirk," said the wall communicator.

"Kirk here. Report."

"Captain, life-support systems are out all over the ship. Manual override has been blocked! Source: Engineering."

"Carry on… well Mr Spock, it seems you were right, and now we're in for it."

"Undoubtedly, Captain."

"Jim," McCoy said, "with all systems out, we only have enough air and heat for four and a half hours."

"I know that. Spock, get some anti-gravs and meet me and Scotty in Engineering."

"What is your plan, Captain?"

"I've got to use something you're a lot better at than I am. Logic."

"Then perhaps I—"

"No. I'm the one Nomad mistook for its Creator. And that's my ace. If I play it right—"

"I understand, Captain," Spock said quietly. "What you intend to do is most dangerous, however. If you make one mistake—"

"Then I'm dead and the ship is in the same mess it is now. Move!"

In Engineering, Nomad was busy at the panels again, and the red alarm lights were winking back on. One crewman was slumped lifeless by the door, another in a corner; obviously they had tangled with Nomad and lost. Scott was crouched behind an engine, out of Nomad's sight.

Kirk went directly to the malignant machine, which ignored him. "Nomad, you will stop what you are doing and effect repairs on the life-support system."

There was no response. Kirk took another step toward the panel, and Nomad said, "Stop."

"You are programmed to obey the orders of your Creator."

"I am programmed to destroy those life-forms which are imperfect. These alterations will do so, without destroying the vessel on which they are parasitic. It, too, is imperfect, but it can be adjusted."

"Nomad… admitted that biological units are imperfect. But you were created by a biological unit."

"I am perfect. I am Nomad."

"You are not Nomad. You are an alien machine. Your programming tapes have been altered."

Silence. The door opened and Spock came in, an anti-grav under each arm; he was probably the only man on the ship strong enough to carry two of them. Kirk gestured him toward Scott's hiding place.

"You are in error," Nomad said at last. "You are a biological unit. You are imperfect."

"But I am the Creator?"

"You are the Creator."

"And I created you?"

"You are the Creator."

"I admit I'm imperfect. How could I create anything as perfect as you?"

"Answer unknown. I shall analyze."

The machine hummed. Spock and Scott edged a little closer.

"Analysis incomplete," said Nomad. "Insufficient data to resolve problem. But my programming is whole. My purpose remains. I am Nomad. I am perfect. That which is imperfect must be sterilized."

"Then you will continue to destroy all that lives and thinks and is imperfect?"

"I shall continue. I shall return to launch point. I shall sterilize."

"Then… you *must* sterilize in case of error?"

"Errors are inconsistent with my prime function. Sterilization is correction."

"All that errs is to be sterilized?"

"There are no exceptions."

Kirk felt himself sweating. So far, so good; the machine, without being aware of it, had backed itself into a logical corner. It was time to play the ace. "I made an error in creating you, Nomad."

"The creation of perfection is no error."

"But I did not create perfection, Nomad. I created error."

"I am Nomad. I am perfect. Your data are faulty."

"I am Kirk, the Creator?"

"You are the Creator. But you are a biological unit and are imperfect."

"But I am *not* the Creator. Jackson Roykirk, who was the Creator, is dead. You have mistaken me for him! You have made an error! You did not discover your mistake! You have made two errors! You are flawed and imperfect—but you did not correct the errors by sterilization! You are imperfect! You have made three errors!"

Under the hammering of his voice, the machine's humming rose sharply in pitch. Nomad said, "Error? Error? Examine!"

"You are flawed! You are imperfect! Execute your prime function!"

"I shall analyze… error… an… a… lyze… err…" Nomad's voice slowed to a stop. The humming continued to rise. Kirk whirled to Scott and Spock.

"Now! Get those anti-gravs on it. We've got to get rid of it while it's trying to think its way out of that box. It won't be able to do it, and there's no telling how long it'll take to decide that for itself—"

They wrestled the anti-gravs onto the whining mechanism. Spock said, "Your logic is impeccable, Captain. We are in grave danger."

They hoisted Nomad and started toward the door with it. "Where to, sir?" Scott said.

"Transporter Room!"

The distance to be covered was not great. As they entered, Kirk took over wrestling with Nomad from Scott, and they dragged the thing to the platform. "Scotty, set the controls for deep space. Two-twelve mark 10 ought to be far enough."

Scott jumped to the console, and Kirk and Spock deposited the humming Nomad on one of the stations.

"Ready, sir."

Kirk and Spock jumped back, and Kirk shouted: "Nomad, you are imperfect. Exercize your prime function. Mr Scott, energize!"

The Transporter effect swirled Nomad into nothingess.

"Now, the bridge, quick!"

But they were scarcely out into the corridor before the entire ship rocked violently, throwing them all. Then the ship steadied. They clambered to their feet and ran on.

On the bridge, they found Sulu wiping streaming eyes. "Captain, I wish you'd let me know when you're going to stage a fireworks display. Luckily I wasn't looking directly at the screen."

"Sorry, Mr Sulu." Kirk went to his command chair and sat down with immense relief. Spock looked at him with respect.

"I must congratulate you, Captain," the Vulcan said. "That was a dazzling display of logic."

"Didn't think I had it in me, did you?"

"Now that you make the suggestion, sir—"

"Well, I didn't, Spock. I played a hunch. I had no idea whether or not it could tolerate the idea of its own fallibility. And when I said it couldn't think its way out of the box, that was for its benefit. Actually, we biological units are well known for our unreliability. Supposing it had decided that I was lying?"

McCoy came in and approached the chair. Spock said gravely, "That possibility also occurred to me, which was why I praised your reasoning while we were still in Engineering. But Nomad really was fallible; by not recognizing that possibility itself, it committed a fourth error."

"I thought you'd like to know," McCoy said, "that Lieutenant Uhura is already at college level. We'll have her back on the job

within a week."

"Good, Bones. I wish I could say the same for the other crewmen we lost."

"Still," said Spock, "the destruction of Nomad was a great waste. It was a remarkable instrument."

"Which might well have destroyed more billions of lives. It's well gone… besides, what are you feeling so bad about? Think of me. It's not easy to lose a bright and promising son."

"Captain?"

"Well, it thought I was its father, didn't it? Do you think I'm completely without feelings, Mr Spock? You saw what it did for Scotty. What a doctor it would have made." Kirk grinned. "My son, the doctor. Kind of gets you right here, doesn't it?"

THE APPLE

(Max Ehrlich and Gene L Coon)

Even from orbit, Gamma Trianguli VI seemed both beautiful and harmless, as close to an earthly paradise as the *Enterprise* had ever encountered. Such planets were more than rare, and Kirk thought for a few moments that he might have happened upon a colonizable world—until the sensors indicated that there was already native humanoid life there.

He duly reported the facts to Starfleet Command, who seemed to be as impressed as he was. Their orders were to investigate the planet and its culture. Under the circumstances, Kirk ordered a landing party of six: himself, Spock, Chekov, Yeoman Martha Landon, and two security guards, Marple and Kaplan.

Carrying tricorders and specimen bags, the party materialized in what might almost have been a garden. Large exotic flowers grew in profusion, and there were heavily laden fruit trees. Here and there, outcroppings of rainbow-colored rock competed with the floral hues, and over it all stretched a brilliant, cloudless day. Feeling a sudden impulse to share all this beauty as widely as possible, Kirk called down McCoy and two more security guards—Mallory and Hendorf, as it turned out.

McCoy looked around appreciatively. "I might just put in a claim for all this and settle down."

"I doubt that the natives would approve, Bones," Kirk said. "But it is pretty spectacular."

"A shame we have to intrude."

"We do what Starfleet tells us."

Spock, who had knelt to inspect the soil, arose. "Remarkably rich and fertile, Captain. Husbandry would be quite efficacious here."

"You're sure about that?" Kirk said, amused without quite knowing why.

"Quite sure. Our preliminary readings indicate the entire planet is covered by growth like this. Quite curious. Even at the poles

there is only a slight variation in temperature, which maintains a planet-wide average of seventy-six degrees."

"I know," Kirk said. "Meteorologically, that's almost impossible."

"It makes me homesick, Captain," Chekov said. "Just like Russia."

"It's a lot more like the Garden of Eden, Ensign," McCoy said.

"Of course, Doctor. The Garden of Eden was just outside Moscow. A very nice place. It must have made Adam and Eve very sad to leave."

Kirk stared at him; Chekov seemed completely straight-faced and earnest. Was this just another of his outbreaks of Russian patriotism, or some side effect of his developing romance with Yeoman Landon?"All right. There's a village about seventeen kilometers away on bearing two thirty-two. We'll head that way."

"Captain!" The call had come from Hendorf, who was examining one of the plants: a small bush with large pods, at the center of each of which was a cluster of sharp, thick thorns. "Take a look at —"

With only a slight puff of noise, one of the pods exploded. Hendorf staggered and looked down at his chest. Perhaps a dozen thorns were sticking in a neat group near his heart. He opened his mouth in an attempt to speak, and then collapsed.

McCoy was there first, but only a quick examination was needed. "He's dead."

"What was all that about Paradise?" Kirk said grimly. He took out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*… Mr Scott, we've already had a casualty. Hendorf has been killed by a poisonous plant at these coordinates. As soon as we've moved out of the way, beam up his body."

"Aye, Captain. That's a shame about Hendorf." Scott paused a moment. "We seem to have a little problem up here, too. We're losing potency in the antimatter banks. I don't think it's serious, but we're looking into it."

"What's causing it?"

"We're not sure. We've run measurements of the electromagnetic field of the planet, and they're a wee bit abnormal. Could have something to do with it."

"Well, stay on top of it. Kirk out."

"I find that odd, Captain," Spock said.

"So do I. But Scotty'll find the problem. Turn up anything with your tricorder?"

"Indeed, sir. Most puzzling. There are strong vibrations under the surface, for miles in every direction."

"Subsurface water?"

"I don't believe so. They are quite strong and reasonably regular. Though I have no evidence to support it, I feel that they are artificially produced. I will, of course, continue to investigate."

"Of course. It may tie in with Scotty's trouble. Ensign Mallory, we'll be heading for the village. Go ahead and scout it out. Avoid contact with the humanoids, but get us a complete picture. And be careful. There may be other dangers besides poisonous plants. Keep in constant communicator touch."

"Aye aye, sir."

Spock held up a hand and froze. "Captain," he said, very softly. "I hear something…" He swung his tricorder. "Humanoid… a few feet away… moving with remarkable agility… bearing eighteen."

Kirk made a quick, surreptitious gesture to the two remaining security guards, who nodded and disappeared in opposite directions in the brush. Kirk moved cautiously forward along the bearing. But there was nobody there. Puzzled, he turned back.

"What is it?" Chekov said.

"A visitor," Spock said. "One wanting to retain his anonymity, I would say."

Martha Landon, who had been sticking close to Chekov throughout, shivered.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing, I suppose," the girl said. "But… all this beauty… and now Mr Hendorf dead, somebody watching us. It's frightening."

"If you insist on worrying, worry about me," Chekov said. "I've been wanting to get you in a place like this for a long time."

She beamed at him; obviously nothing could make her happier. Kirk said sharply: "Mr Chekov, Yeoman Landon, I know you find each other fascinating, but we did not come here to carry out a field experiment in human biology. If you please—"

"Of course, Captain," Chekov said, hurriedly breaking out his tricorder. "I was just about to take some readings."

Kirk rejoined Spock and McCoy, shaking his head. "Nothing. Whoever it is, it moves like a cat."

"Jim, I don't like this."

"Neither do I, Bones, but we have an assignment to carry out. All hands. We've been watched, and we'll probably be watched.

Move out—formation D—no stragglers."

The start of the maneuver brought Spock to an outcropping of the rainbow-colored rock. He picked up a piece, studied it, and applied slight pressure. The lump broke into two unequal parts.

"Most interesting. Extremely low specific gravity. Some uraninite, hornblende, quartz—but a number of other compounds I cannot immediately identify. An analysis should be interesting."

He tucked the smaller portion into his specimen bag, and tossed the larger piece away. When it hit the ground, there was a small but violent explosion.

Kirk, shaken, looked around, but no one had been hurt. "You wouldn't mind being a little more careful where you throw rocks, Mr Spock?"

Spock stared at the outcropping. "Fascinating. Obviously highly unstable. Captain, if indeed this material is as abundant elsewhere as it is here, this is a find of some importance. A considerable source of power."

"Humph. A Garden of Eden—with land mines." His communicator buzzed. "Kirk here. What is it, Scotty?"

"Our antimatter banks are completely inert. I couldn't stop it. But I found out why. There's a transmission of some sort, a beam, from the surface. It affects antimatter like a pail of water on a fire. We're trying to analyze it, but it pinpoints in the area of the village you're approaching, so maybe you could act more effectively from down there."

"Well try. Kirk out… Mr Spock, could this correlate with the vibrations you detected? A generator of some land?"

"Possibly. If so, an immense one. And undoubtably subterranean —*Jim!*"

With a shout, Spock leapt forward and knocked Kirk to the ground. When Kirk got back to his feet, more astonished than angry, Spock was staring at a dozen thorns neatly imbedded in his chest. Then the Vulcan slowly crumpled and fell.

"Spock! McCoy, do something!"

McCoy was already there. "Still alive." He dipped into his kit, came up with his air hypo, inserted a cartridge and gave Spock a shot, seemingly all in one smooth motion. Then, after a moment, he looked up at Kirk. "Not responding, Jim. We'll have to get him to the ship."

"And not just him. We're overextended." Kirk took out his communicator. "Scotty? We're beaming back up, all of us. Notify

the Transporter Room. And make arrangements to pick up Ensign Mallory; he's scouting ahead of us."

"Aye aye, sir… Transporter Room, stand by to beam up landing party… Standing by, Captain."

"Energize."

The sparkle of the Transporter effect began around them. The surroundings started to fade out… and then wavered, reappeared, faded, reappeared and stabilized.

"Mr Scott! What's wrong?"

"No Transporter contact, Captain. The entire system seems to be inhibited. The way it is now, we couldna beam up a fly."

"Any connection with the warp drive malfunction?"

"I dinna ken, skipper, but I'll check on it, and get back to you. Scott out."

Kirk started to turn back to McCoy, then halted with astonishment as he saw Spock stirring. The Vulcan sat up weakly, looking distinctly off his normal complexion.

"Spock!"

"I am quite all right, Captain… A trifle dizzy…"

"Bones?"

"It must be hard to poison that green Vulcan blood. And then there was the shot. I guess he just took a while bouncing back."

"Just what did you think you were doing?" Kirk demanded, helping Spock up.

"I saw that you were unaware of that plant, so I—"

"So you took the thorns yourself!"

"I assure you I had no intention of doing so. My own clumsiness prevented me from moving out of the way."

"I can jump out of the way as well as the next man. Next time you're not to get yourself killed. Do you know how much money Starfleet has invested in you?"

"Certainly. In training, fifteen thousand, eight hundred a year; in pay up to last month—"

"Never mind, Spock. But… thanks."

"Jim," McCoy said, "the more I think about this place, the more I get an idea that… Well, it's kind of far out, but…"

"Go on, Bones."

"Well, when bacteria invade a human body, the white corpuscles hurry to the invasion point and try to destroy the invader. The

mind isn't conscious of it. The body just does it."

"You might be right, Bones. Not only is something after us, but I think it's also after the ship."

Spock shook his head. "To affect the ship at this extreme range, Captain, would require something like a highly sophisticated planetary defense system. It would hardly seem possible—"

He stopped as the group was suddenly enveloped in shadow. They turned as one and stared at the sky. Great towering masses of storm clouds were gathering there. It was impossible; thirty seconds ago the sky had been cloudless. An ominous rumble confirmed that the impossible was indeed happening.

With a deafening clap of thunder, a jagged, blue-white stab of lightning flashed in their midst, tumbling them all like ninepins.

Then the shadow lifted. Kirk got up cautiously. At the spot where the security guard named Kaplan had been standing, there was now only a spot of charred, smoking earth. Helpless, at a loss for words, furious, Kirk stared at it, and then back at the sky as Spock joined him.

"A beautiful day, Mr Spock," Kirk said bitterly. "Not a cloud in the sky. Just like Paradise."

His communicator beeped. "Mallory here, Captain. I'm near the village. Coordinates one-eighteen by two-twenty. The village is—" Mallory's voice was interrupted by a blast of static.

"What was that, Mallory? I don't read you."

"I'm getting static too. I said it's primitive—strictly tribal from the looks of it. But there's something else—"

Another tearing squeal of static. Mallory's voice stopped. Kirk could not get him back.

"Captain," Spock said, "those coordinates were only a few thousand meters off that way."

"Let's go! On the double!"

They crashed off. As they broke out of the other side of the undergrowth, Kirk saw Mallory running toward them over a field littered with rainbow-colored rocks.

"Over there, Captain," the security guard shouted. It's—"

He had turned his head as he ran, to point. It was impossible to tell exactly what happened next. Perhaps he stubbed his toe. A rock exploded directly under him.

By the time they reached him, no check by McCoy was needed. His body lay unmoving, bloody, broken.

Kirk, shaken, closed his eyes for a moment. First Hendorf, then Kaplan. He had known Kaplan's family. And Mallory… Mallory's father had helped Kirk into the Academy…

Spock took his arm, waving the others off.

"Captain… in each case, it was unavoidable."

"You're wrong, Spock. I should have beamed us all up the minute things started to go wrong."

"You were under orders. You had no choice."

"I could have saved two men at least. Beamed up. Made further investigations from the ship. Done something! This… blundering along down here… cut off from the ship… the ship's in trouble itself… unable to help it…"

"We can help it, Captain. The source of the interference with the ship must be here on the planet. Indeed, this may be the only place the difficulty can be solved."

"And how many more lives will I lose?"

"No one has ever stated Starfleet duty was particularly safe. You have done everything a commander could do. I believe—" He broke off, listening. "Captain… I think our visitor is back again."

Reluctantly, Kirk turned to Marple, the last of the security guards of the landing party. "Ensign, go ahead fifty yards, swing to your left, cut back, and make a lot of noise. Mr Spock, Mr Chekov, make a distraction, a loud one."

He moved quietly away from them toward the brush. Behind him, Chekov's voice rose: "What kind of a tricorder setting do you call that?"

"I will not have you speaking to me in that tone of voice, Ensign!"

"Well, what do you want, violins? That's the stupidest setting I've ever seen—and you a Science Officer!"

Kirk crept stealthily forward.

"It's time you paid more attention to your own duties," Spock's voice shouted uncharacteristically. "Furthermore, you are down here to work, not to hold hands with a pretty yeoman!"

There was somebody, or something, ahead now. Kirk parted the brush. Directly in front of him, his back turned, was a small humanoid, his skin copper red, his hair platinum blond. There seemed to be two tiny silver studs behind his ears. Kirk tensed himself to spring.

At the same time, Marple came crashing toward them from the opposite side. The alien sprang up and ran directly into Kirk's

arms. The alien struggled. Measuring him coolly, Kirk struck him squarely on the jaw, and he went down. Clutching his face, he began to cry like a child.

Kirk stood over him, slowly relaxing. Obviously, this creature was no threat. "I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "Do you understand? I won't hurt you."

He spoke, without much hope, in Interstellar. To his surprise, the alien responded in the same tongue, though much slurred and distorted.

"You struck me with your hand."

"I won't strike you again. Here." Kirk extended his hand to help the being up. After a moment, the hand was taken. "You've been following us, watching us. Why?"

"I am the Eyes of Vaal. He must see."

"Who is Vaal?"

"Vaal is Vaal. He is everything."

"You have a name?"

"I am Akuta. I lead the Feeders of Vaal."

The rest of the party began to gather around them. Akuta tried to flinch in all directions at once.

"They won't hurt you either. I promise. Akuta, we have come here in peace. We would like to speak to your Vaal."

"Akuta alone speaks to Vaal. I am the eyes and the voice of Vaal. It is his wish."

"This is fascinating," Spock said. He stepped forward and put his hands gently to Akuta's head, turning it slightly for a closer look at the two small metal studs. "If you will permit me, sir… Captain, observe."

"Antennae?" Kirk said.

Akuta had suffered the examination without protest. "They are my ears for Vaal. They were given to me in the dim time, so the people could understand his commands, and obey."

"The people," Kirk said. "Are they nearby?"

"We are close to Vaal, so we may serve him. I shall take you there."

Kirk's communicator shrilled. "Kirk here."

It was Scott: "Captain, something's grabbed us from the planet's surface! Like a giant tractor beam! We can't break loose—we can't even hold our own."

"Warp drive still out?"

"Yes, Captain. All we have is impulse power, and that on maximum. Even with that, we'll only be able to maintain power for sixteen hours. Then we'll burn up for sure."

"Mr Scott, you are my Chief Engineer. You know everything about that ship there is to know… more than the men who designed it. If you can't get those warp engines going again—you're fired."

"I'll try everything there is to try, sir. Scott out."

Kirk turned to Akuta. "Tell me about Vaal."

"All the world knows about Vaal. He makes the. rains fall, and the sun to shine. All good comes from Vaal."

"Take us to him. We want to speak with him."

"I will take you, but Vaal will not speak with you. He speaks only to me."

"We'll take our chances."

Nodding, Akuta led the way.

Vaal became visible from a clearing some distance away. He was a great serpentlike head, seeming to have been cut out of a cliff. His mouth was open. In color it was greenish bronze, except for its red tongue, which extended from its open mouth. There were steps cut in the tongue, so that a man could walk right up and into the mouth. Two huge fangs extended down, white and polished. Vaal's eyes were open, and they glowed dimly red, pulsating regularly. Even from here, they could hear that the pulsation was timed with a faint but powerful-sounding low-pitched hum.

They drew closer, both Spock and Chekov taking tricorder readings. "Of a high order of workmanship, and very ancient," the First Officer said.

"But this isn't the center, Spock," Kirk said.

"No, Captain. The center is deep beneath it. This would seem to be an access point. In addition there is an energy field extending some thirty feet beyond the head in all directions. Conventional in composition, but most formidable."

"Akuta, how do you talk to Vaal?"

"Vaal calls me. Only then."

Kirk turned to the rest of the party, scowling. "Well, we can't get to it, and we can't talk to it until it's ready to talk."

"Vaal sleeps now," Akuta said. "When he is hungry, you may be able to talk with him—if he desires it."

"When does he get hungry?"

"Soon. Come. We will give you food and drink. If you are tired, you may rest."

He led them down the hill and back into the jungle. It was not very long before they emerged in a tiny village, which looked part Polynesian, part American Indian, part exotic in its own way. There were small thatched huts with hanging batik tapestries, simply made and mostly repeating the totem image of Vaal. At one end of the village area were neatly stacked piles of the explosive rainbow-colored rock. About a dozen aliens were there, men and women, all very handsome, all younger than Akuta. They seemed to be doing nothing at all.

"Akuta," Kirk said, "where are the others?"

"There are no others."

"But… where are the children?"

"Children? You speak unknown words to me."

"Little people," Kirk explained. "Like yourselves. But they grow."

"Ah," said Akuta. "Replacements. None are necessary. They are forbidden by Vaal."

"But," said Martha Landon, "when people fall in love—" Chekov was standing next to her, and at these words he smiled and slipped his hand around her waist. She pressed it to her.

"Strange words," said Akuta. "Children… love. What is love?"

"Well… when a man and a woman are… attracted…" She did not seem to be able to go any farther. Akuta stared at her and at Chekov's arm.

"Ah. The holding. The touching. Vaal has forbidden this."

"There goes Paradise," said Chekov.

During the questioning, the People of Vaal had been drawing closer and closer, not menacingly, but in simple curiosity. Akuta turned to them.

"These are strangers from another place. They have come among us. Welcome them."

A young man stepped forward, beaming. "Welcome to Vaal."

A girl, beautiful as a goddess, though wearing slightly less, stepped out with a lei of flowers in her hands, smiling warmly. She went to Kirk and put the lei over his head. "Our homes are open to you."

Thus encouraged, the others came over, giggling, touching, exploring, examining the clothing and the gadgets of the strangers. Another young woman put a necklace of shells around Spock's neck.

"It does something for you, Mr Spock," Kirk said.

"Indeed, Captain. It makes me most uncomfortable."

"I am Sayana," the girl said. "You have a name?"

"I am Spock."

Sayana repeated the name, pointing to him, and so did the rest of the natives, with a wave of laughter.

"I fail to see," Spock said, "what they find so amusing."

"Come," said Akuta. He led the landing party off to one of the huts. The rest of the People of Vaal continued to crowd around, laughing and probing gently.

The interior of the hut was simple, indeed primitive. There were a few baskets, a few wooden vessels, some hangings with the totem image on them, sleeping mats on the floor.

"This house is your house," Akuta said. "I will send food and drink. You are welcome in the place of Vaal."

He went out. Chekov stared after him. "Now we're welcome. A while ago this whole planet was trying to kill us. It doesn't make sense."

"Nothing does down here," McCoy agreed. "I'm going to run a physiological reading on some of those villagers."

He went out after Akuta. Kirk took out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Come in."

"Scott here, sir."

"Status report, Scotty."

"No change, Captain. The orbit is decaying along the computed lines. No success with the warp drive. We're going down and we can't stop it."

"I'm sick of hearing that word 'can't,' Scott," Kirk said harshly. "Get my ship out of there."

"But, sir—we've tried everything within engineering reason—"

"Then use your imagination! Tie every dyne of power the ship has into the impulse engines. Discard the warp drive nacelles if you have to and crack out of there with just the main section—but get out!"

"Well, we could switch over all but the life support circuits and boost the impulse power—black the ship out otherwise—"

"Do it. Kirk out."

McCoy reentered, frowning. "Incredible," he said. "I ran a complete check on the natives. There's a complete absence of harmful bacteria in their systems. No tissue degeneration, no calcification, no arteriosclerosis. In simple terms, they're not growing old. I can't begin to tell you how old any of them are. Twenty years—or twenty thousand."

"Quite possible," Spock said. "It checks with my atmosphere analysis. The atmosphere completely screens out all dangerous radiation from their sun."

"Add to that a simple diet," Kirk said, "perfectly controlled temperature… apparently no vices at all… no natural enemies… and no 'replacements' needed. Maybe it is Paradise, after all—for them."

Outside, there was a curious vibrating sound, not loud, but penetrating, like the striking of an electronic gong. Kirk went out, beckoning to Spock.

The People of Vaal were no longer lounging around. They were moving off toward the cliff, picking up rocks from the stockpiles as they left. Kirk and Spock followed.

At the cliff, the people entered the mouth of Vaal with the rocks, and came out without them. The red eyes were flashing, brightly now.

"Apparently our hypothesis is correct," Spock said. There is no living being in there. It is a machine, nothing more."

"The field's down. The people are going in. Let's see what luck we have."

Kirk took a step forward. There was an immediate rumble of thunder, to the considerable alarm of the People of Vaal. Kirk stepped back quickly. "That's not the way."

"Evidently not. It is no ordinary machine, Captain. It has shown a capacity for independent action in its attacks upon us. It may well possess a more than rudimentary intelligence."

"But it needs to eat. It can't have any great power reserves."

"Indeed, Captain. But that does not seem to be of help. The ship now has only ten hours to break free."

"What if Vaal's power weakens as it approaches feeding time? Mr Spock, check with the ship; get an estimate of the total energy being expended against it. And measure it every hour."

"With pleasure, Captain." Spock took his communicator out quickly. Deep in thought, Kirk went back to the hut, where he

found all of the landing party outside.

"What was it, Jim?"

"Mess call, Bones."

Spock came up behind him. "A perfect example of symbiosis. They provide for Vaal, and Vaal gives them everything they need."

"Which may also answer why there are no children here," Kirk said. "There are exactly enough people to do what Vaal requires."

"In my view," Spock said, "a splendid example of reciprocity."

"It would take a mind like yours to make that land of statement," McCoy said.

"Gentlemen, your arguments can wait until the ship is out of danger."

"Jim," McCoy said, "you can't just blind yourself to what is happening here. These are humanoids—intelligent! They've got to advance—progress! Don't you understand what my readings indicate? There's been no change here in perhaps thousands of years! This isn't life, it's stagnation!"

"You are becoming emotional, Doctor," Spock said. "This seems to be a perfectly practical society."

"Practical? It's obscene! Humanoids living only so that they can service a hunk of tin!"

"A remarkable hunk of tin, Bones," Kirk said. "And they seem healthy and happy."

"That has nothing to do with it—"

Kirk's communicator cut in. "Kirk here."

"Scott, sir. We've got a reading on the power source as Spock asked. It *is* dropping a bit at a time—nominal, but a definite drain."

Kirk grinned triumphantly at Spock. "Good. Keep monitoring. How are you doing with the circuit switchover?"

"We're putting everything but the kitchen sink into the impulse drive, sir. It'll take another eight hours to complete the work."

"That's cutting it fine, Scotty."

"Aye, sir. But if we don't break out, I'd rather we didn't have to wait long for the end of it."

Kirk took a deep breath. "Right. Carry on, Scotty. Kirk out."

The hours wore away. A large assortment of fruit and vegetables was brought to the landing party by the People. Martha Landon

was nervous and on the verge of tears; Kirk sent her out with Chekov for "a breath of air" and whatever reassurance Chekov could give her. Privately, Kirk hoped also that the People would spy on them; the sight of a little open necking might give them a few ideas disruptive to the absolute control Vaal had over them. Of course, that might provoke Vaal to retaliation—but what more could Vaal do than he was doing now?

Spock seemed to read Kirk's intentions with no difficulty. "I am concerned, Captain," he said. "This may not be an ideal society, but it is a viable one. If we are forced to do what it seems we must, in my opinion, we will be in direct violation of the noninterference directive."

"I'm not convinced that this is a viable society in the accepted sense of the word. Bones was right. These people aren't living, they're just existing. It's not a valid culture."

"Starfleet Command may think otherwise."

"That's a risk I'll have to take." He called the *Enterprise.* "How's it coming, Scotty?"

"Almost ready, sir. We'll need a half hour yet."

"You've only got forty-five minutes until you're pulled into the atmosphere."

"I know, sir. As you said, it's cutting things a bit fine."

"I think we're going to be able to help down here. I'll be back in touch shortly." Kirk cut off. "All hands. We're coming up on the next feeding time for Vaal. Before that happens I want all the Vaalians confined in one hut—the women too, no exceptions. When that gong sounds, round them all up."

The gong in fact sounded only a few minutes later. By this time Chekov and McCoy, phasers drawn, had herded all the People together. They milled around inside the hut, appalled, some wailing and crying.

"Vaal calls us!" Akuta cried out. His face contorted in agony, and he touched the electrodes behind his ears. "We must go to him! He hungers!" The bell rang again. "Please! Let us go to him! We must!"

Kirk got out the communicator again. "Scotty, do you still have phaser power?"

"Aye sir. But what—"

"Lock all banks on the coordinates of the energy field you located down here. On my command, fire and maintain full phasers on those coordinates."

"Aye, sir, but they won't penetrate the field."

"If my guess is right, they won't have to. Stand by."

The bell rang again, louder, longer, more insistently. After checking to see that Chekov and McCoy had the People under control, Kirk and Spock went to the edge of the village. Spock pointed his tricorder toward the cliff.

"Interesting, Captain. The center of the emanations—Vaal—is somewhat weaker than the readings I've been getting. There are wide variations in energy transmission, as though it is drawing from other sources."

"Tapping its energy cells?"

"I would assume so."

"Right. I think the ship's attempts to pull away must have weakened it considerably. It needs to be fed, but the reserve capacity could hold out for days."

"If it has to reinforce its energy field to ward off a phaser attack, it will have to draw more heavily on its reserves."

"My plan exactly, Mr Spock… Kirk to *Enterprise.* Open fire as ordered and maintain."

The phaser beams came down, in long sustained bursts. They were stopped short of the head of Vaal by the force field, but they continued to come down. Sparks flew at the point of contact. A hum rose from Vaal. loud and piercing.

"Tremendous upsurge in generated power, sir. Obviously Vaal is trying to reinforce its energy field."

"Good. Let's see how long it can do it!"

The sky darkened. A strong wind began to blow. Strong flashes of lights lit up Vaal's maw, and some smoke began to appear. The hum was now intolerably loud, and the wind was howling. Lightning flashed overhead, followed by thunder. The din was terrific.

Then, almost all at once, the storm clouds dissipated, the flashes inside Vaal's mouth stopped, and its eyes went out. The hum too was gone.

"Kirk to *Enterprise.* Cease firing."

"No power generation at all," Spock said. "Vaal is dead."

"Mr Scott, status report."

"Tractor beam gone. Potency returning to antimatter banks. I'll put all engineering sections on repairing the circuits immediately. Well have the Transporter working in an hour."

Kirk felt as though a great weight had slid off his shoulders. "You're rehired, Mr Scott. When the Transporter's fixed, form an engineering detail with full analytical equipment and beam them down. I think they'll find some interesting things inside that cave. Kirk out… Bones, Chekov. Let them out."

The People emerged, huddled, frightened, still sobbing. McCoy came over to Kirk and Spock.

"Allow me to point out, Captain," Spock said, "that by destroying Vaal, you have also destroyed the People of Vaal."

"Nonsense, Spock!" McCoy said. "It will be the making of these people. Make them stand on their own feet, do things for themselves. They have a right to live like men."

"You mean they have a right to pain, worry, insecurity, tension… and eventually death and taxes."

"That's all part of it. Yes! Those too!"

"I hope you will be able to find a way to explain it to them." He nodded toward Akuta, who had moved out of the group toward them, tears streaming down his face.

"Vaal is dead. You have killed him. We cannot live."

"You'll live, Akuta," Kirk said gently. "I'll assign some of my people here to help you."

The girl Sayana was crying quietly. One of the young men, standing by her, obviously wanted to comfort her, but did not know how to start. He made several ineffectual gestures; and then, as if by instinct, his arms went around her waist. She moved closer to him, and her head went onto his shoulder.

"But," Akuta said, "it was Vaal who put the fruit on the trees, who caused the rain to fall. Vaal cared for us."

"You'll find that putting fruit on the trees is a relatively simple matter. Our agronomist will help you with that. As for Vaal taking care of you, you'll have to learn to take care of yourselves. You might even like it.

"Listen to me, all of you. From this day on, you will not depend on Vaal. You are your own masters. You will be able to think what you wish, say what you wish, do what you wish. You will learn many things that are strange, but they will be good. You will discover love; there will be children."

"What are children?" Sayana said.

As the young man's arm tightened around her waist, Kirk grinned. "You just go on the way you're going, and you'll find out."

As Kirk, McCoy and Spock were going toward the bridge, McCoy said: "Spock has an interesting analogy, Captain."

"Yes, Mr Spock?"

"I am not at all certain that we have done exactly the right thing on Gamma Trianguli VI, Captain."

"We put those people back on a normal course of social evolution. I see nothing wrong with that. It's a good object lesson, Spock, in what can happen when your machines become too efficient, do too much of your work for you. Judging by their language, those people must have been among the very first interstellar colonists—good hardy stock. They tamed the planet, instituted weather control, and turned all jobs of that sort over to a master computer, powered by the plentiful local ore. I suppose the fatal mistake was in giving the computer the power to program itself—and the end product was Vaal… Bones said something about an analogy."

"Perhaps you will recall the biblical story of Genesis, sir?"

"I recall it very well, Spock."

"We found a race of people living in Paradise, much as Adam and Eve did. They were obeying every word of Vaal. We taught them, in effect, to disobey that word. In a manner of speaking we have given Adam and Eve the apple… the awareness of good and evil, if you will… and because of this they have been driven out of Paradise."

Kirk stopped and swung around on Spock suspiciously. "Mr Spock, you seem to be casting me in the role of Satan. Do I look like Satan?"

"No, sir. But—"

"Is there anyone on this ship who looks even remotely like Satan?"

McCoy was grinning broadly. "I am not aware," Spock said stiffly, "of anyone in that category, Captain."

"No, Mr Spock. I didn't think you would be."

MIRROR, MIRROR

(Jerome Bixby)

The Halkan Council was absolutely polite, but its position was rock-hard, and nothing that Kirk, McCoy, Scott or Uhura could say would alter it. The Federation was not to be allowed to mine dilithium crystals on the planet. There was too much potential for destruction in the crystals, and the Halkans would allow nothing to compromise their history of total non-violence. To prevent that, they said, they would die—as a race, if necessary. The Council accepted that the Federation's intentions were peaceful, but what of the future? There had been mention of a hostile Klingon Empire…

Kirk would have liked to have stayed to argue the question further, but he had already received word from Spock that an ion storm of considerable violence was beginning to blow through the Halkan system—and in fact Kirk could already see evidence of it in the Halkan weather, which was becoming decidedly lowering. To stay longer might risk disruption of transporter transmission, which would strand the landing party for an unknown time. In addition, it was Spock's opinion that the heart of the magnetic storm represented a danger to the *Enterprise* herself.

On this kind of opinion, Kirk would not have argued with Spock for a second; the First Officer never erred by a hairline on the wrong side of conservatism. Kirk ordered the landing party beamed up.

That hairline was very nearly split, this time. On the first attempt, the transporter got the party only partly materialized aboard ship when the beam suffered a phase reversal and all four of them found themselves standing on a bare plateau on the Halkan planet, illuminated only by a barrage of lightning. It was nearly five minutes later before the familiar Transporter Room sprang fully into being around them.

Kirk stepped quickly from the platform toward Spock. "We may or may not get those power crystals…"

And then he stopped, in midstep as well as midsentence. For Spock and the transporter chief were saluting, and a most peculiar salute it was: the arms first folded loosely, then raised stiffly horizontal and squared out. Their uniforms were different, too; basically, they were the same as before, but they were much altered in detail, and the detail had a savage military flair—broad belts bearing exposed phasers and what seemed to be ceremonial daggers, shoulder boards, braid. And the Federation breast symbol was gone; instead, there was a blazon which looked like a galaxy with a dagger through it. A similar symbol, in brilliant color, was on one wall of the room, and the equipment was all in the wrong places—indeed, a few pieces of it were completely unfamiliar.

But what struck Kirk most of all was the change in Spock. Vulcans all look somewhat satanic to Earthmen encountering them for the first time, but it had been many years since Kirk had thoroughly gotten over this impression of his First Officer. Now it was back, full force. Spock looked cold, hard, almost fanatical.

Kirk dropped his hands to his belt—since he did not know how to return the strange salute—and encountered something else unfamiliar. A brief glance confirmed what he had feared: his uniform, too, had undergone the strange changes.

"At norm," Spock said to the transporter chief, in a voice loaded with savage harshness. "Captain, do you mean the Halkans have weapons that could resist us? Our socioanalysis indicates that they are incapable of violence."

Kirk could not answer. He was spared having to, for at that moment Sulu entered the Transporter Room. His movements, his manner, were cold, arrogant, hypercompetent, but that was not the worst of it. The symbol on his breast, the galaxy with the dagger through it, had inside it also a clenched fist, around the blade of the dagger, from which blood was dripping. It was an extreme parody of something familiar; it showed that the gentle Sulu, the ship's navigator and helmsman, was now her chief security officer.

Sulu did not salute. He barked, "Status of mission, Captain?"

"No change," Kirk said carefully.

"Standard procedure, then?"

Kirk did not know what this question meant under these eerie circumstances, but he doubted that operating by the book—whatever the book might say—would accomplish much more than delaying matters, and time was what he needed. Therefore, he nodded.

Sulu turned to the nearest intercom. "Mr Chekov. You will program phaser barrage on Halkan cities, at the rate of one million electron volts per day, in a gradually contracting circle around each. Report when ready."

"Right, Mr Sulu." Was Kirk imagining it, or was there something thick and gloating in Chekov's voice?

"Unfortunate," Spock said, "that this race should choose suicide to annexation. They possess qualities that could be useful to the Empire."

There was the sputtering hum of an overload from the transporter. Spock's head jerked toward the transporter chief, and then, slowly, inexorably, he advanced on the man. Incredibly, the transporter chief *cringed.*

"Are you not aware, chief, that we are in a magnetic storm? And that you were ordered to compensate?"

"Mr Spock, sir, I'm sorry. The ion-flux is so unpredictable…"

"Carelessness with Empire equipment is intolerable." Spock held out his hand toward Sulu, without looking. "Mr Sulu, your agonizer."

Sulu plucked a small device from his belt and dropped it in Spock's outstretched palm. In a vicious burlesque of the Vulcan neck pinch, Spock clapped it to the transporter chiefs shoulder.

The man screamed. Spock prolonged the agony. When he let go, the chief dropped writhing to the deck.

"More attention to duty next time, please. Mr Scott, the storm has produced minor damage in your section. Doctor McCoy, there are also some minor injuries requiring your attention." Abruptly, he kicked the semiconscious man on the floor. "You might begin with this hulk."

McCoy, whose running feud with the First Officer had always had a solid undercurrent of affection to moderate it, wore the look of a man whose worst nightmare has abruptly come true. Kirk saw him balling his fists, and moved in fast.

"Get moving, Dr McCoy. You too, Mr Scott."

Their expressions flickered for a moment, and then both looked down. Now they knew how the Captain wanted them to play it. At least, Kirk hoped so. In any event, they went out without further comment.

The transporter chief dragged himself to his feet to follow. It did not seem to surprise him at all that the ship's doctor, who had just been ordered to attend to him, had not said a word to him. He said, "Mr Spock…"

"What?"

"Sir, the beam power jumped for a moment, sir—just as the landing party materialized. I never saw anything like it before. I thought you ought to know, sir."

Kirk had already heard more 'sirs' in ten minutes than were normal to the *Enterprise* in a week. Spock said, "Another inefficiency?"

"No, sir, the settings were perfectly normal. I made my error after the party arrived, sir, if I may so remind you."

"Very well. Go to Sickbay. Captain, do you feel any ill effects?"

Kirk could answer that one with no trouble. "Yes, Mr Spock, I am decidedly shaken up. I expect Lieutenant Uhura is too. I believe we too had better report to Sickbay for a checkup."

"You will of course report instantly if you are found incompetent to command," Sulu said. It was not a question.

"Of course, Mr Sulu."

"And the matter of the Halkans? A quick bombardment would solve the problem with the least effort."

"I am aware of your—orders—Mr Sulu. I will give you my judgment as soon as I—feel myself assured that I am competent to give it."

"Most sensible."

As Kirk and Uhura left, everyone again saluted—except Sulu. On the trip to Sickbay, Kirk became aware that there were more guards posted along the corridors than he had ever seen except during the worst kind of major alert. None of them were in standard uniforms; instead, they wore fatigues, like civilian workmen. All saluted. None seemed surprised not to have the salutes returned.

Uhura gasped with relief as the door of Sickbay slid closed behind them and the four people who had been the landing party were once more alone together. "What's *happened?*" she said in a low, intense voice.

"Don't talk too fast," Kirk said instantly, though he himself was talking as fast as he could possibly get the words out. He stabbed a finger toward McCoy's intercom. "Something in the air suggests that that thing is permanently open."

The rest nodded. It was a lucky thing that they had all been together so long; it made elliptical talk possible among them. "Now, Bones, that medical. I want you to check for likely effects. I suggest brainwaves first."

"I've already checked myself and Scotty, sir. No hallucinatory or hypnotic effects. We are dealing with—uh, a perception of reality, if you follow me."

"I'm afraid I do. Mr Scott, do you detect any changes in the *Enterprise* which—might have a bearing on our reactions?"

Scott inclined his head and listened. "I hear some sort of difference in the impulse engines. Of course they may just be laboring against the magnetic storm. However, the difference seems to me to be, well, technological in nature, sir."

"Excuse me, Captain," Uhura said, "but I feel a little out of my depth. I felt quite dizzy for a moment after we materialized in the beams. Would it be possible…"

She did not finish the sentence, but instead made the gesture of someone fitting a bucket or a large hat over McCoy's intercom. The physician's eyebrows went up. He stepped to where his diagnostic apparatus should have been, veered in disgust as he found that it had been moved, and then flicked switches.

"I should have thought of that in the first place," he said, "but I'm as confused as anybody here. Everybody used to complain that my stereotaxic screen jammed the intercoms; let's hope it still does."

"We'll have to take the chance," Kirk said. "Lieutenant Uhura, I felt the same effect. At the same time, we were in our normal Transporter Room—and then it faded, we were back on the planet, and then got beamed back to this situation—whatever it is. And the transporter chief—where is he, by the way?"

"I made him mildly sick," McCoy said, "and sent him to quarters. A nasty reversal of role for a doctor, but I want him out of Spock's reach for a while."

"Well, he mentioned an abnormal effect in the transporter itself. And there's this ion storm."

"Captain," Scott said slowly, "are we thinking the same thing?"

"I don't know, Scotty. But everything fits thus far. It fits with a parallel universe, coexisting with ours, on another dimensional plane—or maybe on another level of probability; everything duplicated—almost. An Empire instead of a Federation. Another *Enterprise*—another Spock…"

"Another Jim Kirk?" Scott said quietly. "Another Dr McCoy?"

"No," McCoy said in startled realization. "An exchange! If *we're here…*"

"Our counterparts were beaming at the same time," Kirk said. "Ion storms are common enough, after all. Another storm

disrupted another set of circuits. Now we're here; they're on *our* ship, and probably asking each other much the same questions. And coming to the same tentative conclusions. They'll ask the computer what to do. That's what we'll have to do."

McCoy began to pace. "What about the Halkans? We can't let them be wiped out, even if this is another, completely different set of Halkans, in another universe."

"I don't know, Bones. I've got to buy a lot of time.

Scotty, get below and short the main phaser coupling.

Make it look like the storm blew the standby circuits. Lieutenant Uhura, get to your post and run today's communications from Starfleet Command, or whatever the equivalent is here. I've got to know my exact orders, and options, if any. And by the way, when we want to talk to each other after we're separated, use communicators, and on the subspace band only. And scramble, too."

Uhura and the engineer nodded and left. McCoy had halted his pacing before a sort of glass cage. In it was what appeared to be a large bird, affixed with electrodes. A chart hung beside it.

"What in blazes!" McCoy said. "Jim, look at this. A specimen of an 'annexed' race. I.Q., 180. Experiment in life-support for humans under conditions prevailing on its native planet—heart and lung modifications. It's alive—and if I'm any judge, it's in agony. I won't have such an abomination in my Sickbay!"

"You'll have to, for a while," Kirk said, not without sympathy. "We've got to stay in character until we can get more information. It's an ugly universe, and we don't want to do anything that'll get us stuck with it."

On the bridge, there was a huge duplicate of the galaxy-and-dagger device, and the Captain's chair had widely flared arms, almost like a throne. The man who should be Chekov was eyeing Uhura with open, deliberate, speculative interest, his intent unmistakable. Nobody else seemed to find this unusual or even interesting. Kirk went directly to her.

"Any new orders, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. You are still ordered to annihilate the Halkans, unless they comply. No alternative action has been prescribed."

"Thank you." He went to his chair and sank in. It felt downright luxurious. "Report, Mr Sulu?"

"Phasers locked on Target A, Captain. Approaching optimum range. Shall I commence fire?"

"I want a status report first." He touched the intercom. "Mr Scott?"

"Scott here, sir. I have no change to report, sir. No damage to phasers."

"Very good, Mr Scott." In fact it was very bad, but there was no help for it. As he switched out, Spock came onto the bridge.

"The planet's rotation is carrying the primary target beyond arc of phaser lock," Sulu said. "Shall I correct orbit to new firing position?"

"No."

Sulu flicked a switch. "Now locked on secondary target city."

"Mr Spock," Kirk said. "You said the Halkans could be useful. After my visit with them, I agree."

"If they chose to cooperate. They have not."

"Lieutenant Uhura, contact the Halkan Council. We'll make one more try." Noting Spock's surprise, he added, "This is a new race. They offer other things of value besides dilithium crystals."

"But—it is clear that we cannot expect cooperation. They have refused the Empire. Command Procedure dictates that we provide the customary example. A serious breach of Standard Orders…"

"I have my reasons, Mr Spock—and I'll make them clear in my own good time."

"Captain," Uhura said, "the Halkan leader is waiting on Channel B."

Kirk swung to the small viewscreen above Uhura's station. Tharn was on the screen. He looked much tireder, indeed more tragic, than he had when Kirk had seen him last. Now, how would it be possible to make this sound plausible?

"It is useless to resist us," he said at random.

"We do not resist you," Tharn said,

"You have, uh, twelve hours in which to reconsider your position."

"Twelve years, Captain Kirk, or twelve thousand, will make no difference," Tharn said calmly and with great dignity. "We are ethically compelled to refuse your demand for dilithium crystals. You would use their power to destroy."

"We will level your planet and take what we want. *That* is destruction. You would die as a race…"

"To preserve what we are. Yes. Perhaps someday your slave planets will all defy you, as we have done. When that comes, how will your starships be able to control a whole galaxy?"

"Switch out, Lieutenant." The screen went blank.

"Twelve hours, Captain?" Spock said. "That is unprecedented."

"Phasers off, Mr Sulu."

"This conduct must be reported, Captain," Spock said. "You have placed yourself in a most grave position."

"You are at liberty to do so, Mr Spock," Kirk said, rising. "Take charge. I will be in the briefing room. Inform me of any change. Lieutenant Uhura, attend me there and order Dr McCoy and Mr Scott also to report there. Mr Chekov, relieve Lieutenant Uhura."

He could only hope that this flurry of orders, plus his breach of an unknown regulation, would obscure the fact that he had just called together the landing party.

"Everybody watch your step," Scott said. "They move up through assassination around here. My engine-room chief just tried for me —not personally, but through henchmen. I only got out of it because one of them switched sides."

"What about the technology, Scotty?"

"Mostly variations in instrumentation. Nothing I can't handle. As for star-readings—everything's where it ought to be—except us."

Kirk crossed to the desk and looked down at the computer tap. "Let's see what we're up against. Computer, this is the Captain. Record a Security Research, to be classified under my voiceprint and Mr Scott's."

"Recorded," said the computer in a harsh masculine voice. Evidently this universe had never discovered that men pay more attention to a machine when its voice is feminine.

"Produce all data relevant to recent magnetic storm, and correlate following hypothesis. Could a storm of that magnitude cause a power surge in transporter circuits, creating momentary interdimensional contact with a parallel universe?"

"Affirmative."

"At such a moment, could persons in each universe, in the act of beaming, be transposed with their counterparts in the other universe?"

"Affirmative."

"Can conditions necessary to such an event be artificially reproduced?"

"Affirmative."

"Record procedure and switch off."

A slot in the desk opened and a spool of tape slid out. Kirk handed it to Scott. "It looks like the ball is yours, Scotty."

"I'll have to tap the power for it out of the warp engines, and balance it for the four of us," the engineer said dubiously. "It's a two-man job, and I'm afraid you'd be too conspicuous, Captain. So would Lieutenant Uhura. Come on, McCoy, let's lay it out."

"I'm not an engineer," McCoy said indignantly.

"You will be. Captain, keep up our public relations, please!"

The two went out. After a moment, Uhura said, "Captain—the way this ship is run—what kind of people *are* we in this universe? I mean, what kind of people do we have to pretend to be?"

"Let's find out. Computer. Readout of official record of current command."

"Captain: James T. Kirk. Succeeded to command *E. S. S. Enterprise* through assassination of Captain Karl Franz. First action: suppression of Gorlan uprising, through destruction of rebel home planet. Second action: execution of five thousand colonists on S Doradus Nine, forcing colony to retract secession. Third action…"

"Cancel. Lieutenant, do you really want to hear it tell you what *you're* like?"

Lt. Uhura shuddered. "No. If the way the local Chekov looks at me is any clue, I'll probably hear that my predecessor at my post was my lover, and I got the job by knifing him. How can you run a fifty billion credit star-ship like a pirate vessel?"

"Pirate ships were pretty efficiently run, Lieutenant. Every man feared those above him—with the strongest at the top. Morgan took Panama with his buccaneer ships as neatly as a squadron of naval vessels might have."

"And then was stabbed in his sleep?"

"No, henchmen protected him—not out of respect or devotion, but because his abilities brought them what they wanted. Other checks and balances—other means to the same end."

"But what end?"

"This ship is efficient—or it wouldn't exist. Its Captain was efficient, or he'd be dead. And this Empire will get the dilithium crystals it wants—efficiently."

Uhura's expression remained grim. "And what do you suppose our counterparts are doing, aboard *our* version of the *Enterprise?*"

"I hope they're faking as well as or better than we are. Otherwise, when we get back, we'll all be up on charges." The intercom beeped. "Kirk here."

"Sir, I'm having trouble on this line, I can barely hear you."

"Right." Kirk switched off, produced his communicator, and set it to subspace level and on "scramble."

"Okay, Scotty, here I am. Go ahead."

"We can do it, Captain. But when we interrupt engine circuits, to tie in the power increase to the transporters, it'll show up on the Security Board. We'll just need a second, but…"

"All right, wait a minute." Kirk thought fast. "Lieutenant Uhura, this is going to be nasty. I noticed the local Chekov giving you the eye…"

"He made a flat-out pass at me before you came on the bridge, Captain."

"All the better. For the sake of our getting home, could you encourage him a little?"

Uhura said slowly, "I wouldn't pull a mean trick like that on *our* Chekov. And this one gives me the crawls. But—of course, Captain, if you wish."

"Good girl. Scotty, Uhura can create a diversion on the bridge, which will draw Sulu's attention, I think, at your signal. Now, everyone back to posts, before somebody cottons to the fact that this looks like a council of war."

Uhura slipped out silently. Kirk, too, was about to go, when Spock entered the briefing room by another door, and saluted.

"Captain, a word with you, if I may."

"Of course."

"I should regret your death."

Kirk raised his eyebrows. "Very kind of you, Mr Spock."

"Kindness is not involved. As you know, I do not desire the captaincy. I much prefer my scientific duties—and I am frankly content to be a lesser target."

"Quite logical, as always, Mr Spock."

"Therefore I am moved to inquire if you intend to persist in your unusual course of action regarding the Halkans."

"My orders stand."

"I presume you have a plan. I have found you to be an excellent officer. Our missions together have been successful ones."

"I remember," Kirk said. "Perhaps better than you do."

"I never forget anything."

"I remember that too. Then you will also remember the illogic of waste, Mr Spock. Is it logical to destroy potential workers—equipment—valuable installations—without making every effort to put them on a useful basis? Surely the Empire can afford a little patience."

"Logically, we must maintain the terror," Spock said. "Otherwise the Empire will develop soft spots, and the rot will spread."

"The Halkans made the same point. Is history with us? Conquest is easy—control is not."

"History seldom repeats itself," Spock said, frowning. "Yet I concede that no regime such as ours has ever survived the eventual fury of its victims. The question is, has our power become so vast, quantitatively, as to make a *qualitative* change in that situation? Space, as you say, is against us; its sheer vastness makes communication difficult, let alone control—I did not know you were a philosopher, Captain. We have never talked this way before."

"Perhaps overdue, Mr Spock."

"That is more than possible. I do not judge Commander Moreau to be much of a thinker."

There was quite a long silence, during which Kirk wondered who in blazes Commander Moreau was. Most likely, the man who *was* gunning for the Captain's job.

"Sir," Spock said finally, "I have received a private message from Starfleet Command. I am committing a serious breach of regulations by informing you of its contents. But other considerations supervene. Briefly, I have been instructed to wait until planet dawn over principal target, to permit you to complete our mission. Your delaying maneuver was of course reported to Starfleet Command by Mr Sulu."

"And if I don't?"

"In that event," Spock said, his voice somehow both harsh and reluctant at the same time, "I am ordered to have you killed, and proceed against the Halkans, as the new Captain of the *Enterprise.* I shall of course remove Moreau too, making it appear that he was killed by *your* agents."

"Logical," Kirk said bitterly. "But thank you for the warning, Mr Spock."

"I regret the situation. I shall remain in my quarters throughout the night—in case you should wish to contact me privately."

"Thank you again. But there will be no change."

"Sir—under the circumstances—may I express the greatest curiosity concerning your motives?"

"I'm almost tempted to tell you, Mr Spock. But you'll understand in time. Carry on."

When he left, Kirk sat down at the table. He knew he should be back on the bridge, carrying on the masquerade. But even with Spock's odd sort of cooperation, even supposing Scotty could get them back to their own universe, that would leave the biggest problem unsolved: the fate of the Halkans in this alternate universe. No matter what happened to Kirk, McCoy, Scott and Uhura, the Halkans seemed to be destined for slaughter. And he could think of no way to prevent it.

Then the communicator beeped. "Kirk here."

"Captain, this is Scotty. I've got the whole thing rigged, with McCoy's help. I'm thinking of making him assistant engineer. But in checking it out with the computer, I discovered somethin' vurra worrisome. The two-way matter transmission affected local field density between the two universes—and it's increasing. We've got to move fast. We have half an hour at most. If we miss, we couldn't push back through for a century."

"What's the procedure, Scotty?"

"We're about ready to bridge power from the warp engines to the beams. You've got to go to the main controls and free the board, so we can lock in. Give us ten clock minutes, then you and Lieutenant Uhura create your diversion, and run like Martian scopolamanders for the Transporter Room."

"Right. Count down on the time. Five… four… three… two… one… *hack.*"

"Got you. Good luck, Captain."

No time now to worry about the Halkans; but Kirk worried, nonetheless. On the bridge, Sulu looked speculatively, coldly, at Kirk as Kirk resumed the Captain's chair.

"Orders, Captain?"

"Prepare to lock on to Target A. We fire at planet dawn."

Sulu smiled coldly. "I am glad to see that you have come to your senses. All this computer activity obviously has produced no

alternative answer, except to make me wonder if you had gone soft. And while Mr Spock would no doubt make an excellent captain, you were once clearly the better one. I hope you will continue to be."

Kirk was so sick at the order he had had to give that he did not bother to disguise his disgust. "You don't miss much, do you, Mr Sulu."

"A good Security Officer misses nothing. Otherwise he would deserve to go to the Agony Booth."

Well, Kirk thought grimly, *you may yet, Mr Pseudo-Sulu. Obviously you don't know what that computer activity really was about.*

The Halkan planet's image was showing on Uhura's viewscreen. Chekov was watching her, with very much the same lubricious expression as before. She looked up at the image, and then, as if to herself, said, "Just once, I'd like to think about something besides death."

Sulu shot one contemptuous glance at her and went back to watching the master board. When Scott made his power switch from the warp engines to the transporters, he would catch it.

Uhura looked away from the screen toward Chekov. Her glance was steady for a moment, and then she looked down. Her veiled eyes suggested that she just might be persuaded to change her mind.

The navigator grinned, leaned back in his seat. His arm went out and around toward Uhura's waist.

Sulu paid no attention. And there was one minute left.

Slap!

Sulu looked up. Uhura was standing, in furious indignation. She fell back, one, two, three calculated steps toward Sulu's board. Chekov, astonishment changing to rage, was standing too.

But Sulu seemed to be no more than amused. "As you were, Chekov."

Chekov was not ready to be as he was. He seemed almost ready to attack Uhura. Kirk saw an opening and jumped in.

"Is this the kind of horseplay that goes on when I'm not on the bridge? And at moments as critical as this? Mr Chekov, you are on report; I'll tend to you later. Lieutenant Uhura, you provoked this; proceed immediately to the Booth. Mr Sulu, take Lieutenant Uhura's post."

"Sir," Sulu said. "Why are you also leaving?" The 'sir' was silkily insulting.

"I am going to explain personally to Lieutenant Uhura why she is in the Booth. I'll return shortly; in the mean time, follow standard procedure."

He had caught the streak of sadism and lechery in these loathsome counterparts of his crew. Every man on the bridge grinned slyly and licked his lips.

Then Kirk and Uhura were out, and running for the Transporter Room.

Spock and two crewmen were waiting for them there, with drawn phasers.

"Well, Mr Spock? Have you decided to kill me now, even though I am following my orders?"

"No, Captain. But strange things have occurred since the return of your landing party—including some remarkable calls upon the computer, which I find sealed against me. Nothing in the computer should be sealed against the First Officer. And you are preparing to use an enormous surge of power in the transporter. That could be most dangerous. I must ask you: where do you think you are going, Captain—you and your three conspirators?"

"Home," Kirk said.

"To the alternate universe?"

"You understand *that?*"

"Yes, Captain. And I concur. I will ask you only to gun me down with a stun charge before you leave. My henchmen here will support any story I tell thereafter."

McCoy said, "Mr Spock, in my universe you and I often disagreed, and in this universe I hated you. But you seem to be a man of integrity in both universes."

"It is only logical," Spock said. "You must return to your universe, so that I can have *my* Captain back. I will operate the transporter. You have two minutes and twenty seconds left."

"Mr Spock," Kirk said. "I will shave that time as close as possible. I want to ask you this: How long do you think it will be before the Halkans' prediction of galactic revolt is realized?"

Spock blinked, as if the sudden change of subject had taken him unawares. "I would estimate—approximately two hundred and forty years."

"And what will be the inevitable outcome?"

"The Empire will be overthrown, of course. A sort of federation may replace it, if the period of interdestruction is not too devastating."

"Mr Spock. Consider the illogic of waste. Waste of lives, resources, potentials, time. It is not logical of you to give your vast talents to an empire which you know is doomed."

"You have one minute and twenty-three seconds."

"When change is both predictable and beneficial, why do you resist it?" '

"Suicide is also illogical. One man cannot summon the future."

Kirk closed on this man, who looked and acted so much like his First Officer, and yet had so little of the real Spock's hidden humanity in him. "Mr Spock, one man can change the present. *Be* the Captain of this *Enterprise,* whether you want the job or not. Find a logical reason for sparing the Halkans, and making it stick. Push where it gives. You can defend yourself better than any man in the fleet, if you are anything like *my* First Officer, and I think you are. In every revolution, there's one man with a vision. Which will it be? Past or future? Tyranny, or the right to hope, trust, love? Even here, Spock, you cannot be totally without the decency you've shown on the—the other side. Use it, make it work!"

"You must go," Spock said. "But my Captain never said any such words to me. I will remember them. I can promise nothing else, though I will save the Halkans if I can. Now, quickly! You have eighteen seconds left! Shoot! And goodbye, Jim Kirk."

Kirk stepped onto the transporter platform with the others. He raised the phaser, set to "stun," but it was very hard to pull the trigger all the same.

Kirk relaxed in his chair, soaking in normality. Nearby, Uhura was giving poor Chekov a look that dripped icicles. Kirk himself still felt a little uncomfortable to find Sulu—the 'real' Sulu—at his elbow.

McCoy, however, evidently had not found it at all hard to readjust; his vast knowledge of psychology under stress also enabled him to understand himself. He said enthusiastically to Spock, "When I came out of the beams, Spocko boy, I was so pleased to see you that I almost kissed you. Luckily, revulsion at the very notion set in two seconds later."

"I am grateful that it did," Spock said.

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "Scotty tells me that had you not detected our counterparts immediately, restrained and questioned them, duplicated our calculations, and above all had them shoved into the transporter chamber all ready to make the exchange at the one precise moment, we'd have been stranded forever. I salute you; you have come through for the umpteenth time. But—how did you do it?"

"Sir," Spock said, "you know me as well as any man. But there are elements in my own heart that I do not show very readily. I had to call on them."

"Don't explain if you don't want to. But it would be useful to know how you managed it."

Spock raised his head and looked at some spot faraway in space.

"A civilized man," he said at last, "can easily play the part of a barbarian, as you all did in the other universe. He has only to look into his own soul for the remnants of the savage ancestors from which he sprang, and then—revert. But your counterparts, when we beamed them aboard, were savages to begin with—and had no core of civilization or humanity to which they could revert. The contrast was rather striking."

McCoy said, "Spock, could *you* have played the savage, if you'd been switched along with the rest of us?"

Very seriously, Spock said, "Dr McCoy, I *am* a savage. Both here, and there. But some day, I hope to outgrow it."

THE DEADLY YEARS

(David P. Harmon)

There was no sign of Robert Johnson when the party from the *Enterprise* materialized on Gamma Hydra IV. In fact, there was no sign of anybody, and their arrival site, which otherwise resembled a Kansas field in mid-August, was eerily silent.

There were the overbright sun, the varied greens of leaves and grasses, even the shimmer of heat waves over the adjacent meadow. But all sounds of life were missing—insect, animal, human. All that suggested that it was the specified headquarters of the Johnson expedition was a scattering of pre-fab buildings.

Spock, Kirk noted, was looking troubled too. McCoy said, "Perhaps they weren't expecting us."

Spock shook his head. "Our arrival was scheduled well in advance, Doctor. An annual check of every scientific expedition is routine."

"Besides, I had sub-space contact with the leader of this expedition, a Robert Johnson, not an hour ago," Kirk said.

"Did he report anything wrong, Jim?"

"No… and yet there was *something* wrong. I can't quite nail it down, but his conversation was disjointed, somehow, as though he were having trouble sticking to the subject, or was worried about something." Kirk pointed at the nearest building. "Mr Chekov, check that place. Mr Spock and I will check that one. McCoy, Scotty, Lieutenant Galway, look around, see if you can find anyone."

The group broke up. Arlene Galway was looking a little scared, Kirk thought. Well, this was only her first extra-solar planet; she'd toughen in due course. And the circumstances were a little odd.

Kirk and Spock were about to enter "their" building when a scream rent the air. Whirling, Kirk saw Chekov bursting out into the open, looking about wildly.

"Captain! Captain!" Chekov's voice had gone up a full octave. Kirk loped forward and grabbed him.

"What's wrong?"

"Captain! In there!"

"Control yourself, Ensign! What is it?"

"A man, sir! In there!" Cheokov seemed a little calmer. "A dead man."

"All right, we'll check it. But why the panic? You've seen dead men before."

"I know," Chekov said, a little ashamedly. "But this one's, uh, peculiar, and frankly, sir, it startled me."

" 'Scared' might be the better word. All right, Bones, Spock, let's take a look." Kirk drew his phaser.

The interior of the building was quite dark—not black, but Kirk, coming in from the bright sunlight, had trouble getting used to it. At first, the building seemed quite empty; then he saw some sort of low structure near its end. He approached cautiously.

Then he abruptly understood what had panicked the unprepared Chekov. The object was a crudely constructed wooden coffin, for which two sawhorses served as a catafalque.

The body it held might have been Methuselah's. Deep wrinkles made its facial features also indecipherable. The open mouth was toothless, its near-white gums shriveled, its eyes sunk in caverns, flattened under their lids of flabby skin. The body seemed to be mere bones, barely held together by a brown-spotted integument of tissue-paper thinness. Clawed hands were crossed on its collapsed chest.

Chekov's voice said through the dimness, "I bumped into it walking backward, sir, and I—"

"I quite understand, Ensign. Rest easy. Bones, what's this?"

"Exactly what it looks like, Jim. Death by natural causes—in other words, old age."

"Doctor," Spock said, "I ran a personnel check on the members of this expedition before we beamed-down, and I can assure you that not one of them was…"

Midway through this sentence Kirk became aware of the shuffling of feet outside the open door. They all turned as Spock's voice trailed off.

A man and woman tottered toward them, supporting themselves with sticks. They were stooped and shrunken, the skin of their skulls showing through their thin white hair.

The man said, in a quavering voice, "They've come to pay their respects to Professor Alvin."

"I am Captain Kirk of the—"

"You'll have to speak louder," the man said, cupping his ear with his free hand.

"I said I am Captain Kirk of the *Enterprise.* Who are you?"

"Robert Johnson," said the old man, nodding. "And this is my wife Elaine."

"That's impossible," Kirk said. "The Johnsons are—how old are you?"

"Me? I'm… let me see… oh yes, I'm twenty-nine. Elaine is twenty-seven."

The shocked silence was at last broken by McCoy. "I am a physician. You both need rest and medical care."

There were only three decrepit survivors of the expedition to be beamed-up to Sickbay and Nurse Chapel's gentle but efficient care. Standing beside McCoy, Kirk leaned over Robert Johnson's bed.

"Can you hear me, Dr Johnson?"

The filmed eyes found his face. "Not deaf yet, you know. Not yet."

"Have you any idea what happened?"

"What happened?" Johnson echoed vaguely.

"Did your instruments show anything?"

The. old mind was wandering. As though appealing to some benevolent but absent god, Johnson said, "Elaine was so beautiful… so beautiful."

"He can hear you, Jim, but he can't understand. Let him rest."

Kirk nodded. "Nurse Chapel, if any of them seem lucid, we'll be in the briefing room." He went to the intercom. "Kirk to bridge. Mr Spock, Commodore Stocker, Dr Wallace, to the briefing room, please. Bones, I'll ask you to come along."

Janet Wallace and George Stocker were distinguished guests; he an able administrator in his mid-forties, she an endocrinologist, in her late twenties and extremely attractive. They were waiting with Spock at the big table when he and McCoy arrived. He nodded to them all and sat down himself. "Commodore Stocker, I've asked you to this briefing because Gamma Hydra Four falls within the area of your administration."

Trim, competent-looking, the tall man said, "I appreciate that, Captain."

The merest hint of constraint came into Kirk's voice as he spoke to the dark-eyed girl who sat next to the Commodore. "Dr Wallace, though you are a new member of our crew, your credentials as an endocrinologist are impressive. In this situation we face, I'd appreciate your working closely with Dr McCoy."

She smiled at him. "Yes, Captain."

He turned hastily to McCoy. "Fill them in, Bones,"

McCoy said, "The survivors of the expedition to Gamma Hydra Four are not merely suffering from extreme old age. They are getting older, much older by the minute. My examinations have shown up nothing. I haven't a clue to the cause of this rapidly aging process."

"Mr Spock, what about environment and atmosphere?"

"Sensors show nothing inimical to human life, sir. The atmosphere screens out the usual amount of harmful cosmic rays."

"We are close, though," Kirk said, "to the neutral zone between our Federation and the Romulan Confederation. The Romulans may have a new weapon. Perhaps they have been using members of the expedition as guinea pigs."

"I have begun to investigate that possibility, Captain," Spock said.

Kirk rose. "I want you all to check out everything in your particular specialties. No matter how remote, how far-fetched seems the notion, I want it run down." He paused for emphasis. "We will remain in orbit until we have the answer."

Stocker spoke. "I am anxious to get to Star Base Ten in order to assume my new post. I am sure you understand that, Captain."

"I will do what I can to see that you make your due date, Commodore."

"Thank you, Captain."

The men, pushing back their chairs, left the briefing room. But the dark-eyed Dr Wallace didn't move. Kirk turned at the door. "Anything I can do for you, Doctor?"

"Yes," she said. "You might, for instance, say 'Hello, Janet'. You might be a little less the cold, efficient star-ship captain and a little more the old… friend."

"Janet, as captain, I have certain—my duties are heavy." Then he gave her a wry little smile. "Or maybe I just don't want to get burned again."

"I'm carrying a little scar tissue of my own," she said.

There was a small silence. Then he said, "How long has it been?"

"More than six years, Jim."

"A long time. But there wouldn't be any change if we started it up all over again, would there? I've got my ship; and you've got your work. Neither of us will change."

"You never asked why I married after we called it off."

"I supposed you'd found another man you loved."

"I found a man I admired."

"And in the same field as you. You didn't have to give up anything."

"No, I didn't. But he's dead now, Jim."

She went to him, her hands extended. Kirk hesitated. Then he took one of the hands, his eyes searching the warm brown ones—and Uhura's voice spoke on the intercom.

"Captain Kirk, Mr Spock would like to see you on the bridge."

"Tell Mr Spock I'm on my way." He was finding deeper depths in the brown eyes. "Janet, we're under pressure right now. Maybe, when it eases off, things will be—"

Uhura's voice interrupted again. "Captain Kirk, Mr Scott would like to see you in Engineering."

"Tell him I'll be down after I check with Mr Spock." He drew Janet closer to him. Lifting her chin, he said, "But this time there must be truth between us. You and I, with our eyes open, knowing what each of us are."

"It's been a long six years," she said; and placed her arms around his neck. He had bent his head to her mouth when the intercom spoke for the third time. "Captain Kirk!"

"On my way, Lieutenant Uhura." A sudden wave of weariness swept over him. He touched the girl's mouth with his forefinger. "Six long years—and that intercom is trying to make it six more. Dr Wallace, your lips are as tempting as ever—but as I remarked, my duties are heavy."

The weariness stayed with him on his way to the bridge. Sulu greeted him with a "Standard orbit, Captain." He said, "Maintain" and crossed to Spock at the computer station.

"I have rechecked the sensors, sir. Gamma Hydra Four checks out as a Class M planet, nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, normal mass with conventional atmospheric conditions. I can find nothing at all out of the ordinary."

"How about that comet that recently passed through here?"

"I am running checks on it, sir. As yet I have no conclusions. The comet is a rogue and has never been investigated."

"Captain Kirk!"

It was Stocker. He looked like a man with a determined idea. "Facilities at Star Base Ten," he said," are much more complete than those on board ship. It seems to me your investigations would be facilitated by proceeding there at once. I assure you of every cooperation."

"Thank you, Commodore; but we have a few facilities of our own. I am going to Engineering, Mr Spock." He left the computer station to say to Sulu, "Maintain standard orbit, Mr Sulu."

Surprised, Sulu exclaimed, "But you already gave that order, sir!"

Kirk looked surprised himself. "Did I? Oh, well. Follow it."

As he left the bridge, Spock stared after him, a look of concern in his eyes.

Lieutenant Galway appeared uneasy, too, as she opened the door of Sickbay. "Dr McCoy, can I speak with you a moment?"

"Of course." He motioned her to a chair but she didn't take it. "I know," she said, "that this is going to sound foolish. But—I seem to be having a little trouble hearing."

"Probably nothing important," McCoy said.

"I never had any trouble before."

"I'll have a look at you. Maybe a simple hypersonic treatment will clear it up." She said, "Thank you, Doctor" and followed him into the examination room.

Kirk was discovering some trouble of his own. Alone in his quarters, stripped to the waist, he dried the face he'd just shaved, and reached for the clean shirt he'd laid out on the bed. As he raised his right arm to insert it into a sleeve, a sharp stab of pain struck his right shoulder. He winced, lowered the arm, flexed it, massaging the shoulder muscle. The pain persisted. Slowly, carefully, he put on the shut. Then he moved to the intercom and flicked a button. "Progress report, Mr Spock?"

"All research lines negative, Captain."

Kirk said, "Astronomical section reports that a comet recently passed by. Check into that."

Spock waited a moment before he replied, "I'm doing that, sir, according to your order. We discussed it earlier."

"Oh. Well, let me know what you come up with. I'll be in Sickbay."

"Yes, Captain."

The walk to Sickbay seemed longer than usual. The pain in the right shoulder had extended to the right knee. There was a slight trace of a limp in Kirk's movement as he entered Sickbay. In its bed section, all but one of the three beds was vacant. He thought, "So two of the rescued Johnson party are gone." It was a depressing reflection. Then he saw Nurse Chapel draw a blanket up and over the face of the patient who occupied the third bed.

McCoy looked up. "Robert Johnson, deceased. The last one, Jim. Cause of death—old age."

"You did what you could," Kirk said.

The intercom spoke. "Dr McCoy? This is Scott. Can I come up and see you?"

McCoy answered shortly. "You just need vitamins. But yes, come up anyway, Scotty."

He punched off and Kirk said, "Bones, I believe you're getting gray!"

"You take over my job and see what it does to you!" Low-voiced, McCoy gave an order to Nurse Chapel. Then he turned back to Kirk. "Well, what's *your* problem?"

"My shoulder," Kirk said. "Got a little twinge in it Probably just a muscle strain."

"Probably, Dr Kirk," McCoy snapped.

Kirk grinned. "Reprimand noted, sir. Okay, no more diagnoses by me."

McCoy ran his Feinberger over Kirk's shoulder. He frowned. "Hmmm. Maybe we'd better run a complete check on you."

"Well? Muscle strain?"

McCoy shook his head. "No, Jim. It's an advanced case of arthritis. And spreading."

"But that's not possible!"

"I'll run the check again, but I'll get the same answer."

He didn't run it again. For Kirk, his dismay still on his face was staring past him at the Sickbay door. McCoy turned. Scott stood there—a Scott with snow-white hair who appeared to be sixty years of age.

Sickbay on the *Enterprise* had become a section that seemed to have been appropriated by a Golden Age club. Assembled there on

Kirk's order were every member of the crew who had contacted Gamma Hydra Four. With the single exception of Chekov, each one had been affected by the rapidly aging process. Kirk looked fifty-five: McCoy ten years older. Nor had Spock's Vulcan heritage been entirely able to immunize him against its effects. Wrinkles cracked his face; the skin under his eyes had gone baggy. Lieutenant Galway might have been a woman in her mid-sixties. Scott looked oldest of them all.

"All right, Bones," Kirk said. "Let's have it."

McCoy said, "All of us who went down to the planet, except Ensign Chekov, are aging rapidly. The rates vary from person to person, but it averages thirty years each day. I don't know what's causing it—virus, bacteria or evil spirits. I'm trying to find out."

"Spock? I asked you for some calculations."

"Based on what Dr McCoy gave me, I'd say that we each have a week to live. It would also seem that since our mental faculties are aging faster than our bodies, we will become little better than mental vegetables in less time than a week."

"You mean total senility?"

"Yes, Captain. In a very short time!"

Kirk took a step away from the group. "What a… a filthy way to die!" He turned slowly, accommodating his aching knee. "I want every research facility on this ship, every science technician, to immediately start round-the-clock research. I want the answer! And a remedy! And you might start in by telling me why Chekov wasn't affected!"

"I'm doing what I can," McCoy said. He removed his Feinberger diagnostic instrument from Spock. "You are disgustingly healthy, Spock."

"I must differ with you, Doctor. I am finding it difficult to concentrate. My eyesight appears to be failing. And the normal temperature of the ship strikes me as increasingly cold."

"I didn't say you were not affected."

Scott said dully, "Can I go back to my station?"

"Feel up it it, Scotty?" Kirk asked.

"Of course I do. Just need a little rest, that's all."

McCoy said, "You can leave too if you wish, Lieutenant Galway."

She didn't move. McCoy spoke louder. "Lieutenant Galway?"

"What? You spoke to me, Doctor?"

"Yes. I said you could go. Why not go to your quarters and get some sleep?"

"No! I don't want to sleep! Can't you understand? If I sleep… what will I find when I wake up?"

Kirk said, "Lieutenant Galway, report to your station and continue with your duties."

Her "Yes, sir" was grateful. She rose painfully from her chair, moved toward the door, and came face to face with herself in a mirror. She turned from it in anger.

"What a stupid place to hang a mirror!"

She half-stumbled out. Kirk looked after her. "She's seven or eight years younger than I am. She looks ten years older."

"People normally age at different speeds, Jim."

Kirk pointed to Chekov. "But why hasn't he aged?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I want to know! Is it his youth? His blood type? His glands? His medical history? His genes?"

"Nurse Chapel, prepare Mr Chekov for a complete physical."

She rose. "Come along, Ensign. This won't hurt. Much."

As the door closed behind the nurse and the reluctant Chekov, Janet Wallace turned to McCoy. "A few years ago on Aldebaran Three, my husband and I used a variation of cholesterol block to slow arteriosclerosis in animals."

"Did it work?"

"Sometimes. But the side effects were fierce. We gave it up."

"Try it anyhow, Dr Wallace. Try anything, but do it quickly!"

"Yes, sir." She went out in turn.

"Mr Spock, return to the bridge," Kirk said. "I'll join you shortly. Keep me posted on Chekov, Bones."

He found Janet Wallace waiting for him in the corridor. "I thought you were on your way to the biochemistry lab, Doctor."

"We both go in the same direction, Jim."

After a moment, he nodded. "So we do."

She adjusted her pace to his slower walk. "We know the problem," she said. "We know the effects it is having. And we know the progress of the affliction. Therefore, once we find the proper line of research, it's only logical that we find the. solution."

Kirk smiled. "You sound like my First Officer."

"No problem, Jim—not even ours—is insoluble."

"I could name you five insoluble problems right off the top of my head. For example, why was the universe created? How can we

trust what we think we know? Is there such a thing as an invariably right or wrong action? What is the nature of beauty? What is the proof of Fermat's last theorem? None of those are soluble by logic."

"No. The heart is not a logical organ. Our… situation… doesn't have its roots in logic." She put her arm through his. "When I married Theodore Wallace, I thought I was over you. I was wrong."

Kirk gave her a sharp look. "When did you realize this? Today?"

"What?"

"How much older was your husband than you?"

"What difference does it make?" she asked.

"Answer me!"

"Twenty-six years," she told him reluctantly. Then, as though he'd demanded an explanation, she added, "He was a brilliant man… we were stationed on a lonely outpost… working together —" She broke off to cry, "Jim, I don't want to talk about him! I want to talk about us!"

"Look at me!" Kirk demanded. He seized her shoulders. "I said look at me! What do you see?"

"I—I see Captain James Kirk," she said unsteadily. "A man of morality, decency—strong, handsome—"

"And *old!*" he cried. "Old—and getting older every minute!"

"Jim, please…"

"What are you offering me, Jan? Love—or a goodbye present?"

"That's very cruel," she said.

"It's honest!" His voice was harsh with bitterness. "Just stay around for two more days, Janet! By that time I'll really be old enough for your love!"

Young Chekov was feeling the strain of multiple medical examinations. "Give us some more blood, Chekov!" he muttered to Sulu. "The needle won't hurt, Chekov! Take off your shut, Chekov! Roll over, Chekov! Breathe deeply, Chekov! Blood sample! Marrow sample! Skin sample! They take so many samples of me I'm not even sure I'm here!"

"You'll live," Sulu said.

"Oh yes, I'll live… but I won't enjoy—"

Kirk entered the bridge and he fell, silent. Sulu said, "Maintaining standard orbit, Captain."

"Increase orbit to twenty thousand perigee."

As Kirk moved to his command chair, Yeoman Doris Atkins handed him a clipboard. "Will you sign this, sir?" He glanced at the board, scribbled his name on it and was handing it back to her when Commodore Stocker approached him.

"I hope to have a few words with you, Captain."

"I have very little time, Commodore."

"Very well, sir. I just want to remind you we have a due date at Star Base Ten."

"I'm afraid we'll be late for it, Commodore Stocker. I do not intend to leave this area until we have found a solution to our problem."

"Captain, I am watching four very valuable, and one almost irreplaceable, members of the Starfleet failing before my eyes. I want to do something to help."

"If you are so concerned," Kirk said, "I'll send a sub-space message to Star Base Ten and explain the situation."

At his computer station, Spock shook his head. Kirk noticed the gesture. "Yes, Mr Spock?"

"Captain… you sent such a message this morning."

"Oh. Yes, of course." He changed the subject. "Yeoman Atkins."

"Sir?"

"Where's the report on fuel consumption?"

"You just signed it, sir."

"If I'd signed it, I wouldn't have asked for it! Give it to me!"

The girl timidly handed him the board. There was his signature. Angrily, he handed the board back to her and sank down in his command chair. He saw Chekov and Sulu exchange looks. Uhura's back was resolutely turned.

Kirk closed his eyes. *I need rest. You can take just so much. Then you've had it.* He was helpless; that was the fact. And he had never been so tired before in all his life… worry, despair… they weren't going to change a thing… tired… tired…

As from a great distance, he heard Spock's voice. "Captain! I believe I know the cause! I decided to—" The voice stopped, and Kirk let his mind drift again; but then he was being shaken. "Captain!" He roused himself with immense effort.

"Hmm? Spock? Sorry… I was thinking."

"Understandable, sir."

"Um. Do you have something to report, Mr Spock?"

"Yes, sir. I think I know the cause of the affliction. I cannot be sure, but the lead I have seems very promising."

Alert now, Kirk said, "What is it?"

"The comet," Spock said. "The orbit of Gamma Hydra Four carried it directly through the comet's tail. I examined the residue on conventional radiation setting and discovered nothing. But when I reset our sensors at the extreme lower range of the scale, undetected radiation appeared. Below normal radiation readings… but definitely present. And undoubtedly residue from the comet's tail."

"Good, Mr Spock. Let's get that to Dr McCoy immediately."

Pain stabbed in bis right knee as he rose. He massaged it and limped over to Uhura. "Lieutenant, take a message to Starfleet Command."

"Yes, sir."

"Because of the proximity of the Romulans, use Code Two."

"But, sir, the Romulans have broken Code Two. If you will remember the last bulletin—"

"Then use Code Three!"

"Yes, sir. Code Three."

"Message. Key to affliction may be in comet which passed Gamma Hydra Four. Said comet is now—" He looked at Spock.

"Quadrant four four eight, sir."

"I suggest all units be alerted for complete analysis of radiation; and means found to neutralize it. The comet is highly dangerous. Kirk, commanding *Enterprise.* Send it at once, Lieutenant Uhura. Let's go, Mr Spock."

At the elevator he paused. "Mr Sulu, increase orbit to twenty thousand miles perigee."

Startled, Sulu said, "You mean—another twenty thousand, Captain?"

Kirk whipped around, grim-faced. "I find it difficult to understand why every one of my commands is being questioned. Do what you're told, Mr Sulu."

Spock spoke quietly. "What is our present position, Mr Sulu?"

"Orbiting at twenty thousand, sir."

Kirk looked at Spock's impassive face. Then he said, "Maintain, Mr Sulu."

"Maintaining, sir."

The silence of constraint was heavy in the bridge when the elevator door closed behind them.

But in Sickbay, hope had returned.

"Radiation," McCoy said reflectively. "As good an answer as any. But why didn't we know this earlier?"

"I suspect, Doctor, because my thinking processes are less clear and rapid than they were."

McCoy glanced at Spock. Then he handed his tape cartridge to Janet Wallace. "Run this through, please, Doctor."

"All right," Kirk said. "Keep me posted. I'll be on the bridge. Coming, Spock?"

"I have a question for the Doctor, Captain."

Kirk nodded, left. Spock said, "Doctor, the ship's temperature is increasingly uncomfortable for me. I have adjusted the environment in my quarters to one hundred and twenty-five degrees. This at least is tolerable, but—"

"I can see I won't be making any house calls on you," McCoy said.

"I wondered if there was something which could lower my sensitivity to cold."

"I'm not a magician, Spock. Just a plain old country doctor."

As the Vulcan closed the Sickbay door behind him, Janet turned, frustrated, from the computer. "Dr McCoy, none of our usual radiation therapies will have any effect on this particular form of radiation sickness."

"All right. We start over. We work harder. Faster. Start completely from scratch if we have to. But we must find something."

Outside in the corridor, Commodore Stocker had intercepted Spock. "Can I have a word with you, Mr Spock?"

"Commodore?"

Stocker lowered his voice. "Mr Spock, a Starship can function with a chief engineer, a chief medical officer, even a First Officer who is under physical par. But it is disastrous to have a commanding officer whose condition is less than perfection."

"I am aware of that."

"Please understand me. My admiration for Captain Kirk is unbounded. He is a great officer. But… Mr Spock, I need your help and your cooperation."

"For what, sir?"

"I want you to take over command of the *Enterprise.*"

"On what grounds, sir?"

"On the grounds that the Captain is unable to perform his duties because of his affliction."

"I must remind you that I have contracted the same affliction."

"But you're a Vulcan," Stocker said. "You have a much greater life span. You show the effects to a much smaller degree…"

"I am half human, sir," Spock said. "My physical reflexes are down. My mental capacities are reduced. I tire easily. No, sir. I am not fit for command."

"If you, a Vulcan, are not, then obviously Captain Kirk cannot be."

"Sir," Spock said, "I have duties to perform."

"Mr Spock, I do not like what I'm about to say but regulations demand it. As second in command of the *Enterprise,* you must convene an extraordinary hearing on the Captain's competence."

"I—resist that suggestion, sir," Spock said stiffly.

"It's not a matter of choice. If a Captain is mentally or physically unfit, a competency hearing is mandatory. Please don't force me to quote a regulation which you know as well as I do."

There was a long pause. "Very well," Spock said. "The hearing will convene at fourteen hundred hours."

Under the eyes of a worried Kirk, Janet and McCoy were running final tests of Chekov. The unhappy Ensign was obviously considering rebellion against what seemed to be the thousandth needle jabbed into him during the course of these interminable examinations.

"Now, this won't hurt," McCoy told him.

"That's what you said last time," Chekov said. "And the time before that."

"Did it hurt?"

"Yes," Chekov retorted.

From the door of Sickbay came a whimper: "Doctor… help me…"

They turned. Arlene Galway was clutching the door-jamb for support. She was almost unrecognizable with age. "Please… do something… help…"

She reached out a hand; but before anyone could reach her, she collapsed to the deck. McCoy bent over her, while Kirk looked on, appalled even through the gray fog in which everything seemed to have happened in the last few days—or was it the last few weeks?

"That can't be—Lieutenant Galway?" he quavered.

"It is," McCoy said, his own voice creaky. "Or was. She's dead. Her higher metabolism rate caused her to age more rapidly than the rest of us. But it's only a question of time before—"

"Bones, how long have we got?"

"Oh, it's a matter of days, Jim… perhaps only hours."

It wasn't information calculated to tranquilize a Starfleet captain called to a hearing on his command competence. Nor were the people gathered around the briefing-room table a quieting influence. The mysterious radiation sickness had made deeper inroads on everyone who had made the ill-fated check on the Robert Johnson expedition.

Looking as though he'd passed his fiftieth birthday, Spock opened the hearing by turning to Yeoman Atkins, who was serving as recorder. "Let it be read that this competency hearing has been ordered by Commodore Stocker, here present." He paused. "And reluctantly called by myself."

Kirk said, "Let it also be read that I consider this hearing invalid."

Spock looked down the table at Stocker.

Stocker said, "Regulation seven five nine two, section three paragraph eleven…"

"I know the book, Commodore," Kirk said.

Spock said quietly, "The legality of the hearing, Captain, is unquestionable."

"Mr Spock, may I make a statement?" It was Stocker's question. At Spock's nod, he said, "I've had to resort to these legal grounds to save the lives of some extremely valuable members of the Starfleet. I have tried to convince Captain Kirk of the need to proceed to Star Base Ten—but have been overruled in each case. The responsibility for this hearing is mine."

"On the contrary, Commodore," Spock said. "As presiding officer and second in command of the *Enterprise,* the responsibility is mine. Captain Kirk, would you like to make a statement?"

"Yes!" The word came in a shout. "I am Captain of this ship and am totally capable of commanding her. Call this farce off and let's get back to work!"

"I cannot, sir," Spock said. "The regulations are quite specific." The chill struck him again. "You are entitled, *sir,* to direct

examination of all witnesses immediately after this board has questioned them."

Kirk's voice was acid with sarcasm. "That is very kind of you, Mr Spock."

Spock pushed a button on the computer-recorder. Imperturbable, he said, "Mr Sulu, how long have you served with Captain Kirk?"

"Two years, sir."

"To your knowledge has he ever been unable to make decisions?"

"No, sir."

"Did he order you to maintain standard orbit around Gamma Hydra Four?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he, several minutes later, repeat the order?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he, order you to increase orbit to twenty thousand perigee?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did he not repeat that order?"

"He did not!" Kirk yelled. "When I give an order I expect it to be obeyed! I don't have to repeat myself!"

"Captain, you'll be allowed direct cross-examination privileges when the board has finished."

"Isn't your terminology mixed up, Spock? This isn't a board! It's a cudgel!"

"Captain, it is a hearing not only sanctioned but required by regulations. Will you please answer the question, Mr Sulu?"

"Yes, sir. Captain Kirk repeated his order."

"Commodore?"

"I have no questions," Stacker said.

"Captain Kirk?"

"Let's get on with it."

Spock ground his teeth together to keep them from chattering. His hands felt clumsy with cold. "Yeoman Atkins, you handed Captain Kirk a fuel-consumption report before witnesses. He accepted and signed it. Is that correct?"

"Sir, he had more important things on his mind. The current crisis—"

"Yeoman, you are merely to answer the question."

"I—guess he forgot he'd signed it."

"You guess?"

"He forgot he'd signed it."

"Thank you, Yeoman. You may leave."

It went on. Spock called Uhura to testify to Kirk's failure to recall that the Romulans had broken Code Two.

"All right!" Kirk cried. "I had a lot on my mind! I admit to the oversight!"

"It could have been a dangerous one," Stocker said.

"You are out of order, Commodore," Spock said. "Dr McCoy?"

McCoy was lost in a daydream. "Dr McCoy!"

He roused. "Sorry. Yes, Mr Spock?"

"Several hours ago, at this board's request, you ran a complete physical examination of Captain Kirk."

"I did." McCoy threw a tape across the table at Spock. "It's all there. Enjoy yourself."

Silently, the Vulcan placed the tape cartridge into the computer slot.

The device buzzed, clicked, spoke. "Subject's physical age, based on physiological profile, sixty-three solar years."

There was a silence. Then Kirk said, "I am thirty-four years old."

"The computer differs with you," Stocker said.

"Dr McCoy, give us your professional evaluation of Captain Kirk's present physical condition."

McCoy averted his eyes from Spock. "He is afflicted with a strange type of radiation sickness… and so are you and I and Mr Scott."

"Kindly restrict your comments to Captain Kirk alone, Doctor. What effect has this sickness had on him?"

"He's—he's graying a little. A touch of arthritis."

"Is that all?"

"You know it isn't all! What are trying to do, Spock?"

"What I must do. Is not the Captain suffering from a peculiar physical degeneration which strongly resembles aging?"

"Yes, he is. But he's a better man—"

"Doctor, do you agree with the computer's evaluation of the Captain's physical age?"

"It's a blasted machine!"

"Do you agree with it, Doctor?"

"Yes, I agree. I'm sorry, Jim."

"This board has no further questions. Unless you, Commodore Stocker…"

"I am quite satisfied, Mr Spock."

"Do you wish to call witnesses, Captain Kirk?"

"I am perfectly capable of speaking in my own defense!"

Kirk tried to rise. His knee gave way; and he clutched at the table to keep from falling. "This hearing is being held for one reason and one alone. Because I refuse to leave Gamma Hydra Two."

"Gamma Hydra Four, sir," Spock said.

"Of course. A slip of the tongue. Where was I?" He suddenly clenched his fist and dashed it against the table. "So I'm a little confused! Who wouldn't be at a time like this? My ship in trouble… my senior officers ill… and this—this nonsense about a competency hearing! Enough to mix up any man! Trying to relieve a Starfleet captain of his command. Why, that's… that's… I wouldn't have believed it of you, Spock!"

He glared around the table. "All right, ask me questions! Go ahead! I'll show you who's capable! There's nothing wrong with my memory. Nor with my resolution, either. I repeat, we are maintaining orbit around Gamma Hydra Two!"

The second memory failure stood out, stark-naked.

Spock, cold to bis marrow, spoke quietly into the silence.

"We have no more questions, Captain." He struggled to control his shivering. "If you will leave the room, sir, while the board votes…"

"Fine! You bet I'll leave it. Get your stupid voting over so I can get back to running my ship!"

He limped to the door and turned. "If I'm wanted, I'll be in my quarters."

When the door closed behind him, Spock said, "A simple hand vote will suffice. Dr Wallace is excluded from the vote. Those who agree that Captain Kirk is no longer capable of handling the *Enterprise* will so signify by raising their right hands."

All hands save Spock's were slowly raised.

"Mr Spock?" It was Commodore Stocker. ‘

Spock raised his hand. He addressed the recording computer. "Register a unanimous vote."

Stocker said, "I assume, Mr Spock, that you will now take over command of this vessel."

"Your assumption is incorrect, sir."

"Your reason?"

"By the standards this hearing has used against the Captain: my own physical failings exclude me from any command position."

"All right. Next in line is Mr Scott."

All eyes fixed on Scott. He peered at the expectant faces, blinked, nodded—and was asleep.

"Since all senior officers are incapable, I am forced by regulations to assume command." Stocker was rising from the table when Spock said, "Sir, you have never commanded a starship."

"Whom would you have take over, Mr Spock?"

"There is danger from the Romulans," Spock said.

"Mr Spock, we've got to save these people!" He turned to Sulu. "Mr Sulu, lay a direct course for Star Base Ten. Warp Five."

"Across the neutral zone, sir?"

Stocker nodded. "Alter course immediately."

"Commodore Stocker, I beg you not to underestimate the danger. Or the Romulans." Spock spoke urgently.

"The neutral zone is thinly patrolled at best. I am gambling that the violation will escape the Romulans' notice."

"The gamble, sir, if I may quote the odds—" Spock said.

"You may not!" Stocker strode to the door. "All officers are to return to their stations."

Kirk was alone in his quarters, tired, defeated, crushed by the full weight of his seventy years. When the knock at the door came, he could hardly bring himself to respond to it; but after a moment, he said, "Come in."

Spock entered, followed by Janet, who took up an inconspicuous stance beside the door. Kirk looked up hopefully at Spock, but the First Officer's face, for once, was almost as readable as a book.

"So," Kirk said. "I've been relieved."

"I am sorry, Captain."

"You should have been a prosecuting attorney."

"Regulations required me—"

"Regulations!" Kirk said. "Don't give me regulations, Spock! You've wanted command all along! The first little excuse—"

"I have not assumed command, Captain."

"I hope you're proud of the way you got…" Kirk paused, Spock's words gradually coming home. "What do you mean, you're not in command?"

"I suffer from the same ailment as yourself, sir."

"If you're not in command, who is?"

"Commodore Stocker."

It took Kirk a long moment to place the name. Then he exploded. "Stocker? Are you crazy? He's never held a field command! If Scotty—"

"Mr Scott is in no condition to command. Commodore Stocker, as a ranking officer—"

"Don't prate to me about rank. The man's a chair-bound paper-pusher. Spock, I order you to take command!"

"I cannot, sir."

"You are disobeying a direct order, Mr Spock."

"No, Captain. Only Commodore Stocker can give command orders on this ship now."

Impotent fury rose in Kirk. "You disloyal, traitorous… you stabbed me in the back the first chance you had. You—" His rage mounted as he found that he was weeping. Weeping!"Get out of here! I don't ever want to have to look at you again!"

Spock hesitated, inclined his head slightly, and left. After a moment, Kirk became aware of the female figure still standing beside the door inside his room, making faint sniffling noises. He peered at it.

"Who is it? Jan? Jan?"

"I'm sorry, Jim," she said. "Truly I am."

"I acted like a fool in there. Let them rattle me. Let myself get confused."

"Everyone understood."

"Only I'm not old, Jan. I'm not! A few muscular aches don't make a man old! You don't run a starship with your arms—you run it with your head! My mind's as sharp as it ever was!"

"We'll find a cure."

"A simple case of radiation sickness and I'm relieved of command." He turned and looked at himself in a mirror. "All right, I admit I've gotten a little gray. Radiation can do that."

"Jim," she said, as if in pain. "I have work to do. Please excuse me—"

"Look at me, Jan. You said you loved me. You know me. Look closely—"

"*Please,* Jim—"

"Just need a little rest That's all. I'm not old, am I? Well, Say it! Say I'm not old!"

There was no response. Grasping her by the shoulders, he pulled her to him and kissed her with all the violence of which he was capable. But there was no response—not from her, and what was worse, not even within himself. He released her—and saw the pity in her eyes. He turned his back.

"Get out."

Now what? He could not think. He was relieved. The answer… but there was no answer. Wait. Something about a comet. McCoy. Chekov. The examination room. That was it, the examination room. He hobbled out, cursing himself for his slowness.

Spock was there; so were Nurse Chapel, McCoy and Janet. They all looked very old, somehow. But the hapless Chekov, back on the table again, did not seem to have changed. He was saying: "Why don't I just go back to work and leave my blood here?"

Kirk tried to glare at Spock. "What are you doing here?"

"It would seem the place where I can be of the most use."

"Maybe you'd like to relieve Dr McCoy? Bones, what about Ensign Chekov here?"

"Nothing," McCoy said peevishly. "Absolutely nothing."

"There has to be! There has to be! We went down to the surface together. Beamed-down together. Stayed in the same spot. He was with us all the time. He—"

"*No,* Captain," Spock said, drawing in a sharp breath. "Not all the time. He left us for a few moments."

"Left us?" Kirk stared at the Vulcan, trying to remember. "Oh. Yes—when he went into the building. He… there was… Spock! Something did happen!"

"Indeed, Captain. Doctor, you will remember Professor Alvin's corpse in the improvised coffin—"

"Chekov, you got scared!" Kirk crowed. "You bumped into the dead man, and—"

"You bet," Chekov said. "I was scared, sir. But not half as scared as I am now, I'll tell you that."

"Fright?" McCoy said, raising a trembling hand to his chin. "Yes. Could be. Heart beats faster. Breath short. Cold sweat. Epinephrine flows. Something I read once… epinephrine tried for radiation sickness, in the mid-twentieth century—"

"It was abandoned," Janet said. "When hyronalyn was discovered."

"Yes, yes," McCoy said testily. "Don't confuse me. Why was it abandoned? There was some other reason. I knew it well, once. They didn't know the intermediate? Yes! That's it! AMP! Nurse, ask the computer for something called AMP!"

Christine Chapel, her face a study in incredulitity, turned to the computer read-out panel. After what seemed a very long time, she said, "There's an entry for it. It's called cyclic adenosine three-five monophosphate. But it affects *all* the hormonal processes—that's why they dropped it."

"We'll try it," McCoy said, with a startling cackle. "Don't just stand there, Dr Wallace. Synthesize me a batch. Dammit, get cracking!"

On the bridge, Commodore Stocker was in the command chair. If he was aware of how many backs were pointedly turned to him, he did not show it; he was too busy trying to make sense of the many little lights that were flickering across the console before him.

"Entering Romulan neutral zone, sir," the helmsman said. "All sensors on maximum."

Now who was that?"Thank you, Mr Spock, sorry, Mr Sulu. Lieutenant Uhura, let me know if we contact any Romulan."

"Yes, sir. Nothing yet."

Stocker nodded and looked down again. The little lights danced mockingly at him. As a cadet he had studied a control board something like this, but since then, everything seemed to have been rearranged, and labeled with new symbols which meant nothing to him, with only a few exceptions. Well, he would have to depend upon these officers—

Then the *Enterprise* shook sharply under him, and half of the little lights went red. Ignorance overwhelmed him. "What was that?" he said helplessly.

"We have made contact, sir," Uhura said in a dry voice.

"Romulans approach from both sides, sir," Sulu added.

The ship shook again, harder. Swallowing, Stocker said, "Let's see them."

The main viewscreen lit up. It too was full of crawling little lights, which could not be told from the stars except for their motions, which he could not read either.

"I don't see any Romulans!"

"The ones that are changing color, sir. They change in accordance with their rate of approach—"

The ship bucked under him. All the lights went red.

"We're bracketed, sir," Sulu said evenly.

There was a buzz he couldn't locate. "Engineering calling, sir," Uhura said. "Do you want power diverted to the shields?"

His face felt bathed in sweat. "Yes," he said, at random.

"Mr Scott asks how much warp power to reserve."

What was the answer to that one?

"Commodore Stocker," Sulu said, turning halfway toward the command chair. "We're in a tight. What are your orders?"

The *Enterprise* shuddered once more, and the lights dimmed. Stocker realized suddenly that he was too scared to speak, let alone move—

Then, mercifully, Kirk's voice, thin but demanding, came through the intercom. "What's going on up there? Lieutenant Uhura, this is the Captain!"

"Sir!" Uhura said. "We have violated the Romulan neutral zone, and are under attack."

"The fool. Maintain full shields! I'll be right there."

Stocker felt as though he were about to pass out with relief, but the ordeal wasn't over yet. Voices, more distant, were arguing over the open intercom: "Jim… you can't? neither of us… Nurse… Doctor Wallace…"

"Got to… get to the bridge…"

"Oh Jim, you can't… Nurse… In there…"

Then the voices snapped off. Clearly, Kirk was not about to bail Stocker out yet. Rousing himself, Stocker said, "Lieutenant Uhura, keep trying to raise the Romulans."

"Very well. No response thus far."

"If I can talk to them—tell them the reason why we've violated the neutral zone—"

"The Romulans are notorious for not listening to explanations," Sulu said. "We know—we've tangled with them before."

"Hail them again!"

"I've hailed them on all channels," Uhura said. "They're ignoring us."

"Why shouldn't they?" Sulu said. "They know they have us. As long as we sit here, they can kick away at the screens until they go down."

Stocker ran a hand through his hair. "Then," he said, "we have no alternative but to surrender."

"They'd love that," Sulu said, his back still turned. "They have never captured a starship before. And, Commodore, they never take prisoners."

"Then what—"

"Sir," Uhura said, "you are in command. *What are your orders?*"

In Sickbay, Nurse Chapel and Janet had Kirk pinned down on a bed. He struggled to get up, and despite his aged condition they were having trouble restraining him—a task further complicated by the unpredictable shuddering of the *Enterprise.*

"Greenhorn—up there—ruin my ship—"

"Jim," Janet said through gritted teeth, "if I have to give you a shot—"

"Jim, lay quiet," McCoy said. "You can't do any good. We're through."

"No, no. My ship—"

Spock appeared from the laboratory, carrying a flask. "Dr Wallace, here is the drug. It's crude, but we had no time for pharmacological tests or other refinements."

"All right," said McCoy. "Let's go."

"It will cure… or kill." Spock handed the flask to Janet, who loaded a hypo from it. "A safer preparation would take weeks to test."

"What is it?" Kirk said, quietening somewhat.

"The hormone intermediate," Janet said. "It has to be given parenterally, and even without the probable impurities in it, it

could be extremely hard on the body. Cerebral hemmorhage, cardiac arrest—"

"Never mind the details," McCoy said. "Give it to me."

"No," Kirk said. "I'll take the first shot."

"You can't," McCoy said firmly.

As if on cue, the *Enterprise* shook again. "How long do you think the ship can take a pounding like this?" Kirk demanded. "I've got to get up there!"

"Jim, this could kill you," Janet said.

"I'll die anyway without it."

"Medical ethics demand—" McCoy began.

"Forget medical ethics! My ship is being destroyed! Give me that shot."

"The Captain is correct," Spock said. "If he does not regain his faculties, and get to the bridge to take command in a very few minutes, we shall all die at the hands of the Romulans. Give him the shot, Dr Wallace."

She did so. For a moment nothing seemed to happen. Then Kirk found himself in the throes of convulsions, bucking and flailing at random. Dimly he was aware that all four of the others were hanging on to him.

It seemed to last forever, but actually hardly a minute passed before the fit began to subside, to be gradually replaced by a feeling of exhausted well-being. Janet was pointing a Feinberger at him.

"It's working," she said in a hushed voice. "The aging process has stopped."

"Can't see any change," McCoy said.

"She is correct, Doctor," Spock said. "It is there, and accelerating."

"Janet, help me up," Kirk said, taking a deep breath. "That was quite a ride."

"How do you feel?" she said.

"Like I've been kicked through the bulkhead. Spock, you'll have to wait for your shot; I need you on the bridge. Janet, give McCoy his shot, then Scott." He smiled. "Besides, Spock—if what I've got in mind doesn't work, you won't need that shot. Let's go."

In transit, he felt stronger and more acute with every passing second, and judging by the looks of relief with which he was greeted on the bridge, the change was visible to others as well.

"Report, Sulu!"

"We are surrounded by Romulan vessels—maximum of ten. Range, fifty to a hundred thousand kilometers."

Stocker got out of the command chair in a hurry as Kirk approached it. Kirk punched the intercom. "Engineering, feed in all emergency power, and all warp-drive engines on full standby. I'm going to need the works in about two minutes. Captain out… Lieutenant Uhura, set up a special channel to Starfleet Command. Code Two."

"But, Captain—"

"I gave you an order, Lieutenant. Code Two."

"Code Two, sir."

"Message: *Enterprise* to Starfleet Command, this sector. Ship has inadvertantly encroached upon Romulan neutral zone. Surrounded and under heavy Romulan attack. Escape impossible. Shields failing. Will implement destruct order, using corbomite device recently installed. Since this will result in destruction of *Enterprise* and all matter within two hundred thousand kilometer diameter, and establish corresponding dead zone, all Federation ships to avoid area for at least four solar years. Explosion will occur in one minute. Kirk, commanding *Enterprise.* Out… Mr Sulu. Course 188, mark 14, Warp Eight and stand by."

"Standing by, sir."

From his station, Spock said, "The Romulans are giving ground, sir. I believe they tapped in, as you obviously expected them to."

"A logical assumption, Mr Spock. Are they still retreating?"

"Yes, sir, but are still well within firing range."

"All hands stand by… now, Warp Eight!"

The ship jolted—not this time to an onslaught, but to sudden motion at eight times the speed of light. Spock hovered over his console.

"The Romulans were caught off guard, sir. Not even in motion yet."

"Are we out of range, Mr Sulu?"

"Yes, sir. And out of the neutral zone."

"Adjust to new course. One nine two degrees, mark 4. Heading for Star Base Ten."

"Coming around, sir."

Kirk sat back. He felt fine. Commodore Stocker approached him, his face full of shame.

“Captain,” Stocker said, “I just wanted to assure you that I did what I thought had to be done to save you and the other officers.”

“Noted, Commodore. You should know, however, that there is very little a Star Base can do that a starship cannot.”

“If I may say so, Captain, I am now quite aware of what a starship can do—with the right man at the helm.”

The elevator doors snapped open and McCoy came out. He was as young as ever. Kirk stared at him.

“You’re looking good, Bones.”

“So’s Scotty. The drug worked. He pulled a muscle during the initial reaction, but otherwise he’s feeling fine. Now, Mr Spock, whenever you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now, Doctor.”

“Good. Because of your Vulcan physique, I’ve prepared an extremely potent shot. I’ve also removed all the breakables from Sickbay.”

“That is very thoughtful of you.”

“I knew you’d appreciate it.”

Kirk smiled. “All in all, gentlemen, an experience we’ll remember in our old age… of course, that won’t be for a long time yet, will it?”

I, MUDD

(Stephen J. Kandel)

STAR DATE 4513.3

DOCTOR McCoy was fuming. "Am I this ship's Chief Medical Officer, or am I not?" he demanded of Spock. "This lieutenant has broken two appointments I've set for his physical exam—and no reason can I get out of him!" He stomped across the bridge. "There's something wrong with a man who never smiles, whose conversation never varies from his job routine and who refuses to talk about his background!"

"He's probably frightened of your beads and rattles," said Spock, unsmiling.

Glaring at him, McCoy tramped into the elevator. Spock looked after him. Was it amusement that he permitted to elevate his left eyebrow by a centimeter?

As to the subject of McCoy's ire, he was leaving the elevator on a lower deck. He was tall and straight, but his handsome features lost some of their appeal to an excessive regularity. He strode purposefully toward the Auxiliary Control Room at the end of the corridor. Its heavy door confronted him with "NO UNAUTHORIZED ADMISSION." The Lieutenant glanced around him. He opened the door on a large room lined with computer data banks, panels, consoles.

A technician looked up, frowning. "Command personnel only, sir. You can't come in here." The Lieutenant did not even blink. He reached the technician in two steps, and placing his thumb and forefinger on the startled man's carotid artery, he squeezed. As soon as his struggles ceased, the Lieutenant lowered him to the deck, and went to work on the controls with concentrated, expert speed. A light blinked frantically; an alarm sounded. He shut them off. Then a readout panel came alive with the flash of warning lights, spelling out the words: OVERLOAD. DANGER.

The tall Lieutenant regarded them with emotionless satisfaction.

Sulu's console gave the first hint of something amiss. Alarmed, he called to Kirk. "Captain, there's an unplanned course change being fed into the instruments!"

"Correct it, Mister Sulu." For a moment, Kirk watched the helmsman vainly try to obey his order. He punched a button on the command console. "Auxiliary Control, this is the Captain. What's going on down there?"

There was no reply. Sulu cried, "Auxiliary Control is on total override, sir! I can't make the correction!"

Kirk quickly summoned Security. "Intruder Alert, deck eight, Auxiliary control." As soon as he had received their acknowledgment, he asked Sulu, "What is the imposed course?"

"Turning to 307 degrees Mark eight, sir. Being executed now."

And indeed, the main viewing screen was already showing the lateral movement of stars as the ship turned.

Kirk's intercom sounded. "Security here, Lieutenant Rowe, sir. I'm in Auxiliary Control. Ensign Jordan has been knocked unconscious—he'll be all right, though. But the directional master controls, sir—they've been mangled! They're totally unworkable."

"Any sign of the intruder?"

"No, sir. He's gone. I've put out a full security alert on all decks."

"Very well. Carry on. Kirk out." He swung round toward the Helmsman. "Mister Sulu, cut in Emergency Manual Monitor. I want that override broken."

Again Sulu wrestled with his recalcitrant console. "My instruments won't respond, sir."

Kirk called to Engineering. "Scotty, an intruder may be in your area. Rig a force field to prevent entry."

"Aye, sir."

It was too late. The anomalous Lieutenant had already slipped into the section of Engineering that housed the Emergency Manual Monitor. He silently disposed of another technician as Kirk's voice came through the intercom. "Emergency Manual Monitor, report!" He didn't turn his head. Instead, he moved soundlessly through the door to where Scott and an assistant were setting up the force field. Scott glanced up.

"Here!" he shouted. "You're not allowed to—"

He was slammed up against a wall communicator with a force that knocked the breath out of him. He hauled himself to his feet, grasping at the intercom. "The intruder is—" His words choked off.

Kirk heard the heavy sound of his fall. "Scotty! Scotty!"

The engineering assistant had seized a thick metal bar, and managed to catch the Lieutenant squarely on his handsome head. The Lieutenant didn't even blink; with the edge of his hand he tapped the assistant gently at the juncture of neck and shoulder. The man crumpled without a sound. The Lieutenant shoved him carefully aside with a foot, and moving to the main control panels, flipped every switch to "FULL AHEAD." He then quickly removed a unit panel; as its intricate wiring was forcefully ripped out, there was a rising sound of increased power. The Lieutenant, hearing this, left Engineering at super-speed.

Sulu stared at his console. "Captain, we're picking up speed! Warp five. No, six… Warp *seven* now, sir!"

"Cut power, Mister Sulu I"

"I can't, sir, the controls are jammed!" Sulu was sweating with the fruitless effort to move the switches on his panel.

"Security!" said Kirk tightly, through the intercom. "The intruder is in Engineering Section. All units converge!"

"That will not be necessary, Captain." A cold, even voice cut in. The Lieutenant stepped out of the elevator.

Kirk rose. "Belay that, Mister Sulu. All right, Lieutenant—"

"Norman." Spock supplied the name.

"Mister Norman, have the kindness to tell me what this is all about."

There was no flicker of expression on the too-handsome face. "I am in total control of your ship, Captain. I have connected the matter-antimatter pods to the main navigational banks. A trigger relay is now operational. Any attempt to change course will result in the immediate destruction of your vessel."

There was something about the extraordinary Lieutenant that made his preposterous claims credible. Kirk strode to the computer station, his jaw muscles hard. "Mister Spock?"

"Confirmed, Captain. He has removed all override controls. If we tamper without knowing where that trigger relay is, we could extinguish ourselves."

Kirk wheeled on Norman. "Who are you?"

"I assure you we are no threat to humanity." There was a brief nod toward Spock. "Nor to humanoid life. We simply require your ship."

"So you 'require' my ship, do you? Who, or what, are *we*?"

Norman hesitated. Then he lifted his shirt and opened a flap in his solar plexus, revealing complex transistorized wiring.

The sight chilled Kirk. "An android!" he said slowly.

Spock was examining the mechanism with interest. "A most sophisticated one, Captain."

Norman replaced his shirt. "I control the trigger relay, Captain. I cannot be overcome by physical means, and if you attempt to use your phasers, the relay will be activated.

"We shall continue on our present course for approximately four Solar Days. At that time we shall arrive at our destination. Please believe we mean you no harm."

"I ask you again, who is this 'we' you speak of? Who sent you?"

"I am not programmed to respond in this area."

"Lieutenant" Norman then froze into absolute stillness. What had seemed to be life was drained from his unwinking eyes. Kirk snapped his fingers, close to the android's face. The eyes stared ahead, motionless. He gave the figure a slight push with his hand; its heavy weight did not budge.

"Well, Mister Spock?"

"He appears to have turned himself off, Captain. And since we cannot repair the damage he's done without destroying the ship—"

"It would seem," Kirk said, "that we're going to take a little trip."

For the next four days, people warily circled the immobile presence on the bridge as they went about their errands. The blank-eyed, good-looking face stared disquietingly; the tall body in its *Enterprise* uniform seemingly inanimate.

The ship entered an uncharted quadrant; and slowed. As it dropped to sub-light speed, Norman stirred. He said, "Activate your main viewing screen, Captain."

Kirk nodded to Lieutenant Uhura. "Aye, sir."

Norman spoke again. "At this point I am programmed to inform you that we will enter orbit around our planet in seven-point-four solar minutes."

What looked like a barren ball of rock had appeared on the screen. Norman's eyes were on it He turned briskly to Kirk. "The following individuals will transport down to our planet: Captain, Science Officer, Medical Officer, Communications Officer, Navigator."

Kirk eyed him. "Any discussions or meetings can be held here, on the *Enterprise*."

Norman eyed Kirk. "If you do not come with me, I shall destroy your engines and you will remain in orbit here—forever."

"Do you usually abduct your guests?" said Kirk bitterly.

"This is not our intention." He paused. "There is a word. Among us there is no corresponding one. But it seems to convey something to you humans."

"What word is that?"

"Please."

They materialized in what seemed to be a sort of anteroom, plain and sparsely furnished. As the party began to get its bearings, two girls approached. McCoy and Scott exchanged surprised and appreciative glances. They were beautiful, shapely, brunette, in rose draperies that revealed very human-looking bodies; among their jewels was a necklace with a number engraved on a pendant

Norman broke the silence. "Our planet's surface is what you classify as K-type. It is adaptable for humans by use of pressure domes and life-support systems." He addressed the girl numbered "1."

"I have brought them."

"He is waiting," she said.

Number 2 spoke. "If you will follow us, please." She indicated a large sliding door at the end of the anteroom. Kirk hesitated; but there seemed no alternative. He signaled his people to follow the three androids.

The door moved aside to reveal an immense chamber, carved of purple rock. Luxurious couches flanked its walls. Gilded mirrors abounded; and a bronze fountain in the shape of Venus gushed sparkling water from a golden shell. The room was somebody's dream of a potentate's drawing room… There was even a throne set on a carpeted dais.

At the sight of its occupant, Kirk cried, "I don't believe it!"

"Welcome aboard, Kirk. Been a long time, eh? Have a drink!" Flanked by two more of the brunettes, the lolling Majesty on the throne, wine goblet in hand, scratched his hairy chest and beamed at them.

Kirk, staggered, said, "*Harry Mudd*!"

Mudd guffawed with delight, flinging a fat leg over the arm of his throne. "To be absolutely accurate, laddie-buck, you should refer to me as Mudd the First." He lifted his goblet. "To Me, Ruler of this here sovereign planet!"

"Ruler—?" Kirk slowly recovered from his initial shock. He opened his communicator. "Harry, I want control of my ship

returned immediately. We will not be your guests!" Keeping an eye on Mudd the First, he spoke into the transmitter. "*Kirk to Enterprise*. Come in, *Enterprise*…"

Mudd directed a casual finger at Number 2. She moved to Kirk; and daintily plucking the communicator from his hand, squeezed it into twisted pulp. "No, no, Kirk." Mudd wagged a playful forefinger. "No unauthorized communications. Tut, laddie."

Chekov asked, "Do you *know* this man, Captain?"

"I know him," said Kirk disgustedly. "Harcourt Fenton Mudd, thief—"

"*Oh*, come now," protested Mudd the First

"… swindler and con art—"

"*Entrepreneur*," Mudd corrected.

"… liar, rogue…"

"Ah, did I really leave you with that impression, bucko?" Mudd shook his head sadly.

"—who belongs in jail. Which is where I thought I'd left you, Mudd."

"And thereby hangs a tale. Well, look around, Kirk. Quite a place, eh? Enjoy it?" Mudd's eyes were lurking in rolls of fat.

"Mudd, I want that trained machine of yours to deactivate his trigger relay and free my ship."

"I'll take care of that little thing, Kirk. When I'm ready."

"I'm telling you now!"

"On this planet, *I* am the one who does the telling, Kirk, old chum. *You* do the listening."

Kirk sighed. "All right. For the moment I'm listening. What are you telling?"

"You might as well get used to this place. You'll grow to love it, and that'll be nice. Very nice, because you're all going to stay here. Quite probably for the rest of your lives."

The dismay of his people behind him struck Kirk like a blow. Checkmate. This phony King had him practically squeezed off the board. He could feel fury tighten in his chest. "Harry Mudd, you are an outlaw, a liar, and in very deep trouble. *Release my ship—and do it immediately*."

"Sorry, pal. That'd be against the law." The greasy chuckle came again. "Against my law, decreed by Mudd the First. Voted in by the resident population." He jerked a thumb at the girl beside him.

"Lovely, aren't they? It's my feeling for beauty; I have decreed that I shall be surrounded by it. And all my decrees come to pass."

He leaned forward confidentially. "I've had five hundred Alices made to attend me, all identical—lovely, compliant, obedient…"

Spock spoke for the first time. "Five hundred, all identical? If I may say so, that strikes me as rather redundant."

"I have a fondness for this particular model. Not that I expect you, Mister Spock, to appreciate it"

It suddenly came to Kirk that conversation with Harry Mudd partook of a Wonderland quality. And his tension eased. "All right, Harry. Suppose you explain. How did you get here? We left you in custody after that affair on the Rigel mining planet."

Mudd waved a pudgy hand. "Happenstance. I organized a technical information service, bringing modern industrial methods to backward planets. I made valuable patents available to struggling young civilizations through the galaxy."

"Paying royalties to the owners of the patents?"

Mudd coughed. "Er-hm. Actually, as a defender of Free Enterprise, I found myself in conflict on a matter of principle."

"He did not pay royalties," remarked Spock.

Mudd gulped wine. Wiping his mouth on a velvet sleeve, he said, "Knowledge should be free to all."

"Who caught you?" asked Kirk.

Mudd glared and started to rise. "That, sir, is an outrageous assumption!" He shrugged and sat back as he caught Spock's sardonic look. "I sold the Denebians all the rights to a Vulcan Fuel Synthesizer."

"And the Denebians informed Vulcan," added Kirk.

"How'd you know?" demanded Mudd indignantly.

"It's what I would have done."

Mudd slammed down his goblet on the arm of his throne. "Typical police mentality! No sense of humor, sonny boy. They *arrested* me!"

"Surely not!" McCoy said. "How shocking!"

"Worse," Mudd told McCoy, relishing his apparent sympathy. "Do you know what the penalty for fraud is on Deneb Five?"

"The guilty party," Spock mused aloud, "has a choice; death by hanging, death by electrocution, death by gas, death by phaser—"

Seismic waves overtook Mudd's fat as he shuddered. "The key word, Mister Spock, is 'death.' Barbarians! I… left."

"Broke jail," translated Kirk.

"Borrowed transportation," glared Mudd.

"Stole a spaceship."

"The patrol reacted in a hostile manner," said Mudd.

"They shot at you."

"No respect for private property. They damaged the bloody ship. I got away, but I couldn't navigate. So I just ran into unmapped space. And here I found—Mudd's Planet"

"You would," said McCoy, shaking his head.

Kirk had lost patience. "Harry, get to it."

Spock intervened. "Mister Mudd, you went to substantial risk to bring a Federation Starship here. Logically, you must have had a compelling motivation to have hijacked our vessel."

Mudd's yellow teeth showed in a warped smile. "You'll love it here, Spock. Y'see, I found this planet with over two hundred thousand happy androids, ready to fulfill your every wish." He paused uneasily. "It's paradise."

"Then I fail to see your problem," said Spock.

Mudd pounded the arm of the throne. "*They won't let me go*!" His face flushed with anger. "They want to study me. They want to learn more about mankind!"

"They certainly chose a fine representative of it," said Kirk.

"Watch your tongue, laddie! You're talking about Mudd the First!" He leaned back, pudgy lingers drumming. "Anyway, I ran out of ideas, things for them to do. So they insisted I bring more humans here. They need more humans to study, to serve." He looked at Kirk. "I promised them a prime sample—a Starship Captain, loyal, bright, fearless, imaginative, and so forth and so on. Any captain would have done." He grinned. "I was just lucky to get you, Kirk, laddie. You take over here, and I get off this rock and back to civilization."

"No, Harry."

"You misunderstand me. I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. You have no choice." He spoke to Norman and the Alices. "Show them to their quarters."

In unison, they answered, "Yes, my Lord."

Variously outraged, the *Enterprise* contingent followed the androids to a side door. Near it was what might have been another door, darkly opalescent. Despite his indignation, McCoy was curious.

"What's behind this, Mudd?"

Mudd chortled. "Ah. That, gentlemen, is a shrine to the memory of my beloved Stella."

"Who?"

Mudd pressed a button; the "door" was a wall niche. As it lit up the gaunt, beaky figure within, clad in a long, prim black dress, began to move.

"M'wife," said Mudd simply.

"Dead?" asked Kirk, not roughly.

"Oh, no. Merely… deserted." Mudd sighed. "Behind every great man, there is a woman urging him onward and upward. My wife urged me onward and upward into space. She didn't mean to, but she did. Her confounded, eternal nagging —" He paused to sigh again. "I think of her constantly. And every time I do, I go further into space."

"Interesting," McCoy said. "You run away from a woman and then bring her along, so to speak."

"Uh, no. Not quite. I had the androids construct a facsimile of Stella, so I could gaze upon her and rejoice in her absence." He touched another button. The android Stella burst into life.

Glaring at him, her red topknot quivering with *fury*, she burst into screech. "Harcourt! Harcourt Fenton Mudd, what have you been up to now? Nothing you'd dare tell me, I'll be bound! We-ell, let me tell you, you lazy, good-for-nothing skirt chase—"

"Shut up," Mudd said happily. Instantly the android Stella subsided into lifelessness. Mudd chuckled. "Marvelous. I finally have the last word!" He turned to Kirk, "With her—and with you too, sonny boy."

Their quarters were next to a lounge that resembled a hotel lobby.

"You'll find our arrangements quite comfortable,"Norman said.

Alice 1 spoke. "If there is anything you need…"

"My ship," said Kirk promptly.

Alice 2 said, "We are not programmed to respond in that area."

Kirk looked away from her. "Who created you, Norman?"

"The Makers designed us. They came from the Andromeda galaxy."

"Then your Makers were not human?" McCoy asked, interested.

"They were, as you say, quite humanoid. Robots were common in their civilization. We performed all necessary service functions,

freeing our Makers to evolve a perfect social order."

"What happened to them?" inquired Spock.

"Our home planet's sun went nova. Only a few exploratory outposts survived. This unit"—he touched his chest—"was part of one such outpost in your galaxy."

"Then some of your Makers also survived?"

"No, Captain. They died over a stretch of time. We do not die."

"And whom do you serve now?"

"We serve Harry Mudd. He has given us purpose again. Purpose is necessary. We have lacked it for a long time."

Spock was right, Kirk thought. This was a highly sophisticated machine. "Norman," he said, "your Makers were destroyed, and you were isolated in this galaxy. How long have you been waiting?"

"In your terms, one million, seven hundred forty-three thousand, nine hundred and twelve years, thirteen days, four hours, twenty minutes and fifty seconds."

Everyone stared at him. McCoy broke the general awe. "Well, there's one thing," he said. "We'll always know just exactly how long we've been here. Just ask… this unit."

And it weighed a ton, Kirk reflected. "I don't plan to be a prisoner," he said.

"You are not a prisoner, Captain. You are a guest. You are free to go anywhere you choose."

"Anywhere?"

"That is correct. Is there some place in particular you wish to—"

"Yes. My ship."

"I am not programmed to respond in that area."

Kirk flared. "I'm getting a little tired of that statement! Do you know that my ship can destroy this planet? And all you along with it?"

"An interesting reaction," observed Norman.

Spock nodded. "I, too, have always found it so. It is called anger. It is caused by frustration."

"You have fascinating mental processes, Mister Spock. I sense a kinship with you."

"There you are, Spock!" McCoy cried triumphantly. "I knew it all the time. Brother to a pile of tin."

"Beryllium, Doctor,"Norman corrected. "And other alloys." If his handsome face had been capable of expressing pride, it would

have done so. "We have a very well-equipped library and computer section. Our research laboratories have much to offer. You are welcome to visit there."

"All right," said Kirk. "We might, later. Now would you mind leaving us?"

"Why should we leave you?" said Alice 1.

Kirk inhaled a deep breath. "Because-we-do-not-like-you."

"A well-motivated request," said Alice 2. "We shall leave."

As they departed, Kirk turned to his officers. "Well? Opinions?"

"I think we're in a lot of trouble," Chekov said.

"That's very helpful, Ensign. Bones?"

"I agree with Chekov. We *are* in a lot of trouble."

"Spock?"

"Obviously, Captain, so many androids cannot operate independently. There must be a central control focus of some description, one which directs the android population."

"I think you're right, Spock," said the captain, after a moment. "That's where we start. Spock, you see if you can locate it. The rest of you, check around. Learn everything you can. Find out what makes this place tick. And I'll see if I can get any more out of Mudd. Let's go."

There was a central control section. Spock found it without difficulty at the end of a corridor. But all it contained was one small electronic unit. Norman was standing with his hands on it, as though in communion. Out of his *Enterprise* uniform, in the drab coverall worn by the android males, he looked even less human. He nodded to Spock.

"I trust you are enjoying yourself, Mister Spock."

"I find it almost interesting. That is an unusual device you are holding."

"Our central computer." Norman's hand rested lightly on it.

The Spockian eyebrows rose. "Oh? It seems rather inadequate for those of your sophistication. Did I understand that there are more than two hundred thousand of you?"

"Two hundred and seven thousand, eight hundred and nine," said the mathematically meticulous Norman.

"All of which are controlled through this device?"

Norman hesitated. The badge he wore began to glow. "I am not programmed to respond in that area."

"I am hardly surprised. This appears to be a simple relay center."

"It is our central control complex. Perhaps you would be interested in our computer banks. They are beyond this wall."

"Indeed? I would." As they strolled toward an entrance, Norman went on.

"They stretch for nearly ten of your miles, Mister Spock…"

"Fascinating," said Spock. And he meant it.

In the workshop section, Mudd and two Alices were doing the honors for Uhura and the Captain. On a model stand another android female was posed.

"This is one of our Barbara series," explained Alice 19. "The body is covered with a self-renewing plastic over a beryllium-titanium alloy skeleton."

"Most impressive," said Kirk.

"I should say so!" Uhura was enthusiastic.

"She, too, was built to my personal specifications," said Mudd. "As were the Maizies, the Trudies, and the Annabelle series."

"Don't you believe in male androids, Harry?"

Mudd shrugged. "I suppose they have their place."

Uhura, wondering, asked Alice 263, "How long would a body like that last?"

"I do not know."

"You don't know?"

"None of our android bodies has ever worn out. However, the estimated duration of that one on the stand is five hundred thousand years, before it may begin to need a few repairs."

Kirk nodded. "Economical."

Uhura was still taking in the information. "Five hundred thousand years…"

"Immortality," Mudd told her. "Or as near as makes no difference."

Staring at the Barbara 4, Uhura murmured wonderingly, "Five hundred thousand years…"

"And the best part is," said Mudd, "she'll be beautiful for every single one of those years." He appraised the *Enterprise* Communications Officer with a connoisseur's eye. "You're a beautiful woman yourself, Miss Uhura. But everyone grows old, even with the best geriatric techniques available. Yet here—you could have *that*." He indicated the form on the stand.

Alice 19 picked up the cue. "Our medi-robots are able to place a human brain within a structurally compatible android body. Occasionally, one of our Makers had it done for work on an inhospitable planet"

Mudd was saying to Uhura, "Immortality, eternal beauty; they are possible, here." He smiled his yellow smile and walked away, leaving her looking extremely thoughtful. Kirk noted her rapt expression uneasily.

Spock was saying, "I am convinced that I have discovered an important inconsistency, Cap—" when he was interrupted by the return of Mudd, followed by a beaming McCoy.

"Jim, you should see the research facilities! They've got a lab that—well, if I could spend the rest of my life—"

"Don't get carried away, Bones. Nobody's staying anywhere."

Mudd wagged his forefinger at Kirk. "Naughty, naughty. Stubborn, too."

"Well," McCoy sighed. "I wouldn't be bored, I assure you." A familiar voice was shouting outside the door. Alice 22 entered, pulling the protesting, foot-dragging Scott as though he were a recalcitrant three-year-old.

"Let me go you—you—Captain! What kind of women…?"

He was released as soon as he was well inside the room. Alice 22 said serenely, "This is the last, my Lord."

"Spendid," said Mudd The First. "Long time no see, Scotty, old pal."

"*Harry Mudd*! So you're behind this—this—" Scott spluttered.

Kirk said, "Mister Scott, you were ordered to stay on the ship!"

"Aye, sir, and stay I did—until this female gargantua threw me into the transporter beam!"

Kirk wheeled on Mudd. "What did she mean— 'He's the last?'"

"Didn't I tell you?" said Mudd blandly. "I thought I did. I beamed a few dozen androids to your ship. We've been sending your crew down to the surface for the last couple of hours. They're all down now."

Kirk seized a vase and hurled it the length of the Throne Room. His voice shook. "Are you out of what passes for your mind? You can't beam the whole crew of a starship down to a planet! Somebody has to be on board!"

"But someone is on board, Kirk. An entire crew of androids. They learn very rapidly." The yellow teeth showed in a smirk. "The

fact is, Captain, I've taken over your ship completely. And there's nothing at all you can do about it."

Kirk fought back toward composure. He looked at the thief, swindler, liar. "You'll never get away with it, Harry."

"Who's to stop me?"

"Star Fleet!"

"I have a ship as fast as any in the Fleet. How will they catch me? Oh, I'll get away with it young-feller-me-lad! I'll get away with it!" He turned on his heel "Think of it, bucko. Harry Mudd and his crew of luscious lovelies—on your *Enterprise*!"

Kirk sank down on a brocaded sofa. Spock spoke. "It is illogical to delude oneself, Captain. He could successfully accomplish this. I have questioned a number of the androids. They are totally loyal to Mudd. Perhaps what should now concern us is the fact that this android population can literally provide anything a human being could wish for—in unlimited quantity."

"I know," said Kirk sourly. "How will my crew react to a world where they can have absolutely anything they want, simply by asking? Mister Spock, bad trouble is what we're in." He stood up. "The sight of this room sickens me. Let's get some fresh air."

The sight of the Throne Room did not sicken Chekov. Wandering in, he saw the empty throne. He tried it for size. As its rich comfort embraced him, a chime rang. Two Alices promptly appeared, with carafe and goblet.

Chekov eyed them both. "You're Alice—7"

"I am Alice 118."

"I am Alice 322."

"Oh," said Chekov. "Weil, it doesn't make much difference. You're both lovely."

"Thank you, Lord," said Alice 322.

At least her duplicate didn't repeat the phrase. She poured wine. "You desire something further, Lord?"

Chekov sighed. "What a shame you're not real."

"We are, Lord," they chorused.

"I mean," said Chekov carefully, "real *girls*."

"We are programmed to function as human females, Lord." It was Alice 118 who broke this astonishing news. It precipitated a large grin on Chekov's face as he looked from one to the other—equally desirable, equally well-programmed.

"That unprincipled, lecherous kulak Harry Mudd programmed you?"

"Yes, Lord."

Chekov leaned back in the throne. "This is a very pleasant place. I've seldom seen one I liked better."

In the lounge area, other members of the *Enterprise* crew were reaching the same conclusion. An engineering technician, reclining, was contemplating a bowl of grapes, between sips of wine held to his lips by Alice 73. A female Yeoman, attached to the galley staff, was ecstatically receiving an expert back rub from Oscar 114. Alice 600 was playing a lute for an entranced Ensign. A Barbara was feeding another crewman with exotic tidbits. A Trudy, transparent skirt awhirl, moved in a slow, provocative dance.

The engineering technician, summing up the general feeling, sighed, "This is heaven."

Scott had discovered the workshop. He lifted a tool. "Fantastic," he said. "Capable of handwork to the finest tolerances." He looked around him. "Microvision, nanopulse lasers… I've never seen anything better!"

Kirk heard the comment as he entered the workshop with Mudd. Norman was saying, "You can command us to make anything for you, Mister Scott. Or do the work yourself for pleasure. You may have the services of any number of craftsmen, exclusive use of computer facilities, anything you wish."

"Captain, take a look at this shop! It's got equipment we haven't even thought of yet," sighed Scott.

"Is this the way you're going to do it, Mudd?" said Kirk. "Hit my people at their weakest points?"

Norman answered. "We only wish to make you all happy and comfortable, Captain. If we are to serve your kind, we must understand you. Our lord, Harry Mudd, has been our only sample of your species. Now we have all of you and we are learning a great deal."

Kirk Ignored him. "Mister Scott, meet me in my quarters. Tell the members of our original landing party that I want to see them."

As Mudd shrugged, Kirk strode angrily out of the shop.

In the spacious room that had been assigned to him, Kirk looked around at the familiar faces. "All right. Here we are, birds in a gilded cage!" he said. "A *cage*! So the question is, how do we get out of it?"

"I don't know, sir," sighed Chekov. "But it is a very nice gilded cage."

"We're bogged down in Mudd," said McCoy.

"I find that acutely painful, Doctor," remarked Spock.

Uhura spoke. "It *is* pleasant, Captain."

Kirk eyed her sharply. "What have you been offered, Lieutenant?"

"Sir?"

"The bribe," he told her impatiently.

"Oh. Virtual immortality, sir."

Kirk paced the length of the room. He turned back to them, his face hard. "The only way we'll be really happy is to get back to our ship. And don't you forget it! This cage may be gilded, filled with every goody any of you have ever wanted, but it's still a cage!" Anger thickened his voice. "We don't belong here! We've got a job waiting for us out there!"

He whirled on Chekov. "You, Mister Chekov, with your two pretty —servants! And you, Scotty, with the greatest machine shop in the galaxy! Uhura… the promise of a body that will never die. Bones and his unlimited medical facilities! Spock—what did they offer *you*?"

"I cannot, of course, be tempted, Captain." Spock cleared his throat. "However, I find their company quite refreshing. I admire the precision of their minds. And I must admit that the prospect of a flight on a ship manned by a crew that never tires, never makes mistakes…" He paused. "Plus an android doctor who does not consider himself a comedian, strikes me as most intriguing. There is something to be said for android society."

"All right, Spock," McCoy growled. "You stay. We'll leave. I've always found your computers better company than—"

The door opened and Alice walked into the room. Kirk barely had time to read her number before she was standing in front of him.

"Do you require something, Lord?"

The casual interruption infuriated him. "Yes, I do," he said. "My ship is what I require. I want it back."

The musical android voice replied, seeking information, "Why do you want it back?"

"Because it would please us!" Kirk shouted. "Because we desire its return to us!"

Spock added quietly, "We are unhappy here. Unhappiness is not to our best interest."

For a moment, the lovely machine-girl froze. Her pendant glowed; 471-471-471. Then she moved to Spock. "Please explain unhappiness."

"Happiness is a state which occurs in humans when all desires and wants are fulfilled."

"What wants and desires of yours are not fulfilled? It is our wish to give you happiness."

"Then give us our *Enterprise*!"

She stared at Kirk, and froze again. Once more the badge glowed. "The *Enterprise* is not a want or desire, Lord. It is a simple mechanical device."

Desperate, Kirk cried out. "She is a beautiful lady! And we love her! Can't you understand that?"

This time she froze for several minutes. The badge glowed, glared, and flared into brightness. Alice 471 buzzed and clicked. When she spoke, her voice was tinny, unmusical. "Illogical. Illogical. All units relate. All units. Norman. Coordinate." Her mechanism whirred, and stilled. Her next words came in her ordinary, melodic tones. "Unhappiness does not relate. We must study it." She walked out the door.

Kirk struggled with a repulsion mixed with pity. "Spock, you saw that?"

"Yes, Captain. The spectacle relates to an earlier conclusion of mine—to a certain cybernetic technique I observed in a conversation with Norman. I—"

"Just a minute," Kirk said. "Bones, have you made any psychological readings of the androids?"

"I have—and you can forget it. They're perfect, flawless, physically and mentally. No weaknesses, no vices, no fears, no faults. Just a sense of purpose—and there's nothing tougher to overcome, even among humans."

"We could use a little among the crew," said Kirk. "They seem to —Spock, what were you saying?"

Another Alice stepped through the door. "My Lord Mudd wishes to confer with Captain Kirk and Mister Spock."

"And we wish to talk to him. Come on, Spock."

Mudd was waiting for them near the android Stella, flanked by Alice 2 and Norman. Kirk spoke at once. "We've got a lot of questions to ask you, Harry."

"Afraid I won't have time to answer them, partner. I'm all packed. The androids will take the *Enterprise* out of orbit in twenty-four hours. It's been great having you here. Is there anything I can get for you?"

"My ship."

"You're a stubborn man, Kirk. But I don't mind that. I'll be saying good-bye to you soon enough, and you can be stubborn to your heart's content." He walked over to the alcove, and patted the robot Stella. "For the last time, Stella, old girl…" He pushed the activating buttons.

The Stella came to shrewish life. "Harcourt Fenton Mudd, *what have you been up to*? Shame on you! You've been *drinking* again! Ohhh, you'll come to a bad end—"

"Shut up."

The screech stilled. Grinning, Mudd placed a fat arm around Alice 2. "Alice, my little love," he said, "get my bags and have them transported up to the ship."

"No," she said.

It had been so long since Mudd had heard this word that he did not recognize it. "My bags are—" He broke off. "What's that you said, my poppet?"

"I said 'no,' " replied Alice 2.

Alice 1 spoke from the throne steps. "We can no longer take your orders, Harry Mudd."

He stared at her. "And why not?"

"Our Makers were wise," stated Norman. "They created us to serve. We have studied you and now we will serve you."

"That's what I'm telling you! Now get my bags to the ship!"

"Harry," said Kirk. "I think they have something else in mind."

"You are correct, Captain."Norman's voice was as toneless as ever. "Harry Mudd is flawed, even for a humanoid. We recognized this from the beginning. But we needed his knowledge to obtain more specimens.

"Your species is self-destructive, greedy and corruptible. You need our help."

"We find it more satisfying to help ourselves," said Kirk. "We make mistakes, we're far from perfect—but we're human. That's the word that explains us."

Inexorably, Alice 1 said, "Our Makers programmed us to serve. We will serve you by their wisdom. You will not be harmed, but we will take the spaceship while you remain here."

Panic stricken, Mudd rushed to his throne. Clambering on to the symbol of his authority, he said "No! Look here, now, you can't do that!

You—you can only serve us by obeying. Obedience, that's it. You must obey! Alice— *Yeeeow*!"

Effortlessly, Alice 1 had lifted his weight from the throne and dropped him heavily to the floor.

Groaning, he raised himself to his knees. "Kirk, tell them!" he implored.

"Norman, maybe you had better do the telling. What are your plans for us?" said Kirk.

"We shall not harm you. But we cannot permit so weak and greedy a race free run of the galaxy."

"I see," said Kirk, "And how do you intend to stop us?"

"We shall serve. Your kind will be glad to accept our service. Soon they will depend upon it. Safe from harm, their aggressive and acquisitive impulses will come under control. The galaxy will have peace—under our care."

"The whole galaxy? Controlled by androids?"

Alice 1 extended a dainty foot and kicked Mudd aside. "Yes, Captain. We have a projected figure; the galaxy will be under our control within twelve years, seven months and two days."

"And we shall serve you," said Norman, with the pride only a robot anticipating its true function can experience.

Alice 2 added, gently, "And you will all be happy; happy and controlled."

It was the contrast between what she said and the soft, feminine voice with which she said it that chilled Kirk with horror.

The hedonists had deserted the lounge area. Kirk avoided speculation as to where they were, as he looked at the pale and shaken Mudd the First. "Harry, you've given this situation some amusing aspects, but this threat from your androids is not funny."

Spock agreed. "Indeed it is not. With their remarkable mental processes, disciplined, rational, unemotional—and their unparalleled physical qualities—they quite possibly may be able to take over the galaxy."

Mudd shuddered. "Take my word for it, they can. They can do anything they make up their little mechanical minds to do."

"Whatever method we use to stop them, we must make haste," said Spock grimly. "They have only to install some simple

cybernetic devices aboard the *Enterprise*, and they will be able to leave orbit."

"Spock, how do you know so much?" McCoy asked suspiciously.

"I asked them."

"Oh."

"Why shouldn't they answer questions, Bones? They don't think we can do anything to stop them."

"Neither do I," said Chekov.

Uhura gave him a chilling look. "Are you sure you *want* to stop them, Ensign? Because you seem perfectly happy here!"

"We Russians are a very adaptable people," mumbled Chekov.

Mudd had been churning with repressed rage and frustration. "You're so smart, Kirk, you and that Vulcan thinking machine of yours. Come up with something, why don't you? I'm as anxious to get off this rotten rock as you are!"

"I seem to remember," said McCoy, "you trying to leave us behind, and get away by yourself."

"Like the Russians, we Mudds are very adaptable people."

Kirk lifted a hand. "That's enough. We can't afford to squabble, we've only a few hours to stop them. Spock, what have we got to go on?"

Perhaps this time, Spock might be able to complete his sentence. "No androids, sir, no robots —even these—are capable of creative thought. As to the device they claim is their central control, it is utterly inadequate to the task of directing more than two hundred thousand of them."

Kirk nodded. "Good, So we start there. What *does* direct them?"

"There are numerous Alices, Trudies, Maizies, even a Herman and an Oscar series. But there is only one Norman."

Kirk's pulse quickened. "Noman! That's right. When I told that Alice that the *Enterprise* was a beautiful lady that we loved, what was it she said—'illogical'—"

" 'Illogical. All units relate. All units. Norman. Coordinate.'"

" 'Norman. Coordinate,' " repeated Kirk. "Why Norman—unless Norman *is* the coordinator!"

"It would seem logical, Captain. To function as they do, each android mind acts as a component of what amounts to a mass brain. The individual brain would need a link to the mass one through a central locus."

"Named Norman," mused Kirk. "The essential connection to a gigantic and highly intelligent mind. And those badges—they glow when the mass mind is called into operation!"

"The logic appears incontrovertible."

"Yes," continued the Captain. "Logical is exactly what it is. And that gives us a weapon to turn against it!"

Faces turned toward him, inquiringly. "That's it! What we need is wild, insane, irrational illogic, aimed right at Norman."

"What are you talking about, Kirk?" said Mudd plaintively. "Why are you singing and dancing?"

"About what seems to be our only opportunity," explained Mister Spock patiently.

"Opportunity?" Mudd shook his head sadly. "Spock, you may be a brilliant Science Officer, but believe me, you couldn't sell liver pills to your mother!"

Spock stared, baffled. "My mother? My mother, sir, would have no use for—"

"Forget it," Mudd said.

"Back to the point, please," said Kirk. "Harry, you said you wanted to help. Did you mean that?"

"Gentlemen, Miss Uhura, I'm with you," said Harry Mudd, sincerely. "Believe me, that wholesome, antiseptic galaxy those android are planning—purgatory! Purgatory, gentlemen, for a man like me!"

Kirk regarded the fat man thoughtfully. "All right. The androids will be expecting us to make a break for it. That's where you come in, Harry." He nodded to McCoy, who drew a filled hypo from his medikit.

When Mudd saw it, he paled with alarm. "Now, wait a minute. I said I was ready to help, but—" Kirk grabbed one of his arms as Spock seized the other. Mudd, struggling between them, cried, "What I had in mind was advice, sage counsel, a few words of wisdom—*what are you doing*?"

The hypo hissed against his arm. He sagged, unconscious. Kirk and Spock were hard put to hold him upright.

"Harry," said Kirk, "I do believe you've put on weight."

Spock and McCoy hauled the large, limp body over to a sofa. Kirk went quickly to the Throne Room and hit a signal button. As the chime died away, Alice 1 came through the side door. There was no more "Lord-ing." She merely said, "Yes?"

"We have a medical problem," Kirk told her. "Your ex-lord Harry Mudd."

"He is human. You will have to care for him."

"We are caring for him, but our doctor needs his sickbay equipment. It's aboard the *Enterprise*," said Kirk, with urgency.

"The starship is forbidden to humans," she said.

"You've been programmed to serve!" said Kirk, hoping he sounded sufficiently desperate. "If you deny us access to medical facilities on our ship, Mudd will die, cease to function! And you—you will have failed to serve!"

Alice 1, hesitated, her badge glowing brightly. When it went dark, she nodded. "I am directed to observe your problem."

Mudd was sprawled on the lounge sofa. He had recovered consciousness, but his face was flushed. "Fever," said McCoy darkly, bending over him solicitously.

Alice 1 obeyed orders; she observed the situation. She reached a conclusion. "He is malfunctioning."

Grimly, McCoy corrected her. "He is dying."

"If you take him to your sickbay, will he become repaired?"

"Yes." Gathered round Mudd's deathbed, they waited for the android's answer.

"No," said Uhura flatly. The other officers stared. She tossed her head and turned her back on them. "They're lying. The doctor injected something into Mudd to make him look sick. It's a trick—a trick to get back on board the ship, and sabotage it!"

Alice 1 made further "observations." She noted the shock on the human faces around her, the baleful glances directed at the treacherous Uhura, Her badge glowed and darkened.

"The request is refused."

Kirk stepped angrily toward the beautiful Bantu, who backed off. "*Why*?" he choked.

"I want an android body," said Uhura fiercely. "I *want* immortality. I can be young and beautiful forever, and I want it!"

Kirk's voice was bitter. He turned to the Alice. "All right. We tried to trick you."

"There will be no reprisals, Captain. We are not humanly vindictive."

Uhura came closer, eagerly. "And your promise… You'll keep your promise? I'll get the body?"

"Yes."

"Now—I want it now!" breathed Uhura.

Alice 1 seemed disconcerted by this human impatience. "Control Central is being prepared for transfer to the starship. It is—"

"You made a commitment!" said Uhura, stamping her foot.

"Yes. Yes." But this agreement was uncertain. The pendant again glowed and went dark. "The commitment is acknowledged and recorded."Alice 1 paused. "Programming for your body will begin immediately. The computer will complete programming before we leave."

"Thank you," said Uhura, with a triumphant look at her colleagues.

Without a backward glance, Alice 1 departed. Uhura looked a little anxiously at the others. They exchanged glances, and began to close in on her. She moved away, her hands in front of her, toward the door. Spock cut behind her, cutting off her escape. He reached the door, opened it cautiously, and peered out. He closed it, and nodded to Kirk, waiting near the cowering Uhura.

Grinning delightedly, he gripped her shoulders. "Beautiful!"

Uhura smiled. "I half believed it myself… Immortality. It has a nice sound…" She sighed.

"A human mind would go mad in a robot body," said McCoy.

Uhura shrugged. "What matters is that it worked."

"And now the escape attempt the androids expected has been made," said Spock.

"What's next?" said Chekov.

"Next?" answered the Captain. "We're going to take the Alices on a trip through Wonderland!"

Alice's adventures were to develop in the Throne Room. Kirk and Scott seated themselves on a step of the dais, while the two android girls stood guard. McCoy, idling near the door, began whistling a waltz, and his hands positioned themselves as though he held a fiddle.

The door popped open, and Uhura swept into the room in the arms of Chekov. As they whirled to the music of the violin, Scotty —getting into the spirit of the thing—began to play the bagpipes.

Alice 2 leaned over. "What are they doing, Captain?"

"Celebrating," said Kirk, smiling and beating time.

"What are they celebrating?" asked Alice 118.

"Their captivity. Are you enjoying the music?"

"Music." The Alices looked from McCoy, chin crushed against his imaginary fiddle, to Scott, mysteriously involved with his bagpipes. They turned to stare at the dancers, but they had stopped.

Chekov, stepping back, bowed deeply to Uhura. "Thank you, lovely, lady," he purred, "You dance divinely."

Uhura curtsied, dextrously managing her invisible long skirts. "Thank you, gentle sire." She rose gracefully, and slapped Chekov hard across the face.

Chekov bowed again. "You are very beautiful today!" he bellowed.

"Thank you, gentle sir!" Uhura yelled, hauling off to belt him another.

"Why does she strike him?" asked Alice 2, urgently seeking enlightenment.

"She likes him," said Kirk. He rose, calling. "Ensign Chekov! This is your captain speaking. Attention! Stand still!"

Chekov dropped into a squat, his legs flying wildly in a mad kazatsky. "Hey!"

"That's better," called Kirk.

Alice 118 spoke. "This is illogical," she said.

Kirk turned to her. "On the contrary, your statement is illogical."

The number badges glowed brilliantly; the androids immobilized. A high-pitched humming came from somewhere inside them. Chekov, in mid-"Hey!", stopped at Kirk's signal and came over, panting slightly. The androids were motionless and silent.

"It looks good," said Kirk. McCoy, taking a tricorder reading, nodded.

"Completely inner-directed. Oblivious."

"Ha!" said Kirk with satisfaction. "I wonder how Spock's doing?"

He was doing very well. His deep, deep interest in workshop tapes had impressed Alice 27 and Alice 210. "Of course," he was saying, "Your computations would inevitably lead to total description of the parabolic intersection of dimension with dimension."

"You are quite perceptive, Mister Spock," remarked Alice 27. "You possess a very logical and analytical mind."

"Yes," said Spock. Gravely, he turned to Alice 27. "I love you," he said. He then turned to Alice 210. "But I hate *you*."

"But I am identical in every way with Alice 27!"

"Of course," said Spock. "That is why I hate you. Because you are identical."

The two mechanical girls looked at each other, pendants aglow. They froze. Spock examined them with genuine interest.

"Fascinating," he said to himself, and departed for the Throne Room.

The Alices were still inert. McCoy was circling them, with tricorder open. "It certainly seems to have worked on these subordinate units. But that doesn't prove anything yet."

Spock, entering, agreed. "We have been successfully pruning the leaves and branches; now it's time to get to work on the root."

"High time," Kirk assented. "If Norman is the real control center for all of them, he should be already loaded down with what we have been doing so far. If we can double-bind the coordination center, we should immobilize all of them at one swoop. I hope. Everybody got their parts straight?"

Mudd grinned. "Kirk, old man, I'm beginning to have more respect for you. If we get out of this, would you be interested in forming a partnership? I've got a few ideas—"

"I'm sure you have, Harry. Let's go!"

Norman was standing in the control center, his fingers on the electronic unit. The attendant Alices looked up as the group came in.

"What do you want here?" said Norman.

Kirk answered. "I want you all to surrender."

"That is illogical. We are invulnerable. We are stronger."

"No," said Kirk. "We are stronger. We shall prove it. Can you harm a human you are programmed to serve?"

"No."

"But you have harmed one, Norman, my lad," said Mudd.

The badges glowed. Kirk, glancing at the others, gave an almost imperceptible nod. Mudd stepped forward, and assumed the stance of an orator.

"We humans, you poor soulless creatures, we humans do not live by bread alone. We are nourished by Liberty!" A pudgy hand waved in a dramatic salute. "For what is Man without freedom? Naught but a handful of dust—gumming up the cogwheels of Eternity?"

"Yes!" Kirk cried, passionately. "And you— all you offer us is well-being! As though food, drink and happiness meant anything to us. Don't you know we must work, we must be about our job, suffering pain and torment, labor without end, dying and crying and lamenting our burdens? Only in this way can we be happy!"

The badges crimsoned. Norman seemed confused. "This… is… contradictory… It is… not… logical… Mister Spock! Explain!"

The android turned for succor to the only remaining rational being among the captives.

Spock obliged. "Logic," he said didactically, "is a little purple bird chirping on a twig. Logic is a chaplet of pretty flowers that smells very bad… Are you sure that your circuits are functioning correctly?" He moved in for the final blow. "Your ears are turning green."

The androids, paralyzed, hummed. And Scott came forward.

"I am tired of happiness. I am weary of comforts and pleasures. I can't go on! Kill me! I am ready!" He threw his arms wide, baring his breast for the knife.

Obliging, the others cocked their index fingers at his waiting chest. They whistled. Scott clutched his rib cage and fell, with a last long moan. "Ooohhhhh!" He writhed. He twitched. He agonized. As he finally subsided, an Alice lurched to one side and did not straighten up.

A grinding noise came from Norman. "You. Cannot. Have. Killed. Him… You. Have. No. Weapons."

Kirk fell to his knees beside the prostrate Scott. "Poor Mister Scott. He had too much happiness. Now that he's gone, he will be truly happy. We shall miss him." He rose, and confronting his officers, said solemnly, "Let's hear it for our dead friend!"

Wild paroxysms of laughter filled the room. At a tiny signal from Kirk, they stopped short. Kirk struck an heroic pose.

"What is Man but that lofty spirit, that sense of daring, that devotion to duty to what cannot be sensed, cannot be deduced but only dreamed? The highest Reality! I thank you!"

"That. Is. Irrational." Norman whispered unevenly. "Il-log-i-cal. Dreamzz are. Not. Re-al-i-ty." The other Alice whirred, frozen.

Mudd snapped his fingers. "I guess it must be done. Spock, the explosive."

Reaching under his tunic, Spock withdrew a handful of air. He molded it with care. "Please be cautious, Mister Mudd," he said. "I wouldn't want you to drop it." He pulled back an arm, wound up

for the pitch and hurled the air to Mudd. Mudd leaped, reaching above his head.

"Watch out!" McCoy yelled, covering his head with his arms.

"Got it!" shouted Mudd.

Norman weaved, glassy-eyed, as he stared at them. Mudd slammed the ball of air on the computer. As McCoy moved over toward him, he extended his hand.

"Detonator," he said. McCoy handed him— nothing. Mudd carefully attached it to the air ball.

"Fuse." Again McCoy handed him nothing, a small one. It too was gingerly attached.

"Primer." But the explosive was not yet fully prepared.

"Mashie." He got one.

"Niblick." He got that, too.

"But. There is. No. Explosive." said Norman.

"No?" said Kirk. "Observe. Harry, *detonate*!"

The *Enterprise* officers cringed, anticipating the blast. Mudd pushed the plunger. "Boom!" shouted everybody at once, and fell to the floor, arms over their heads.

Norman lurched. "B-b-but There. Was. No. Ex-. Plo-. Sion."

Mudd shrugged. "I lied."

"Harry's a liar," said Kirk. "Whatever he tells you is a lie. Understand, Norman? *Whatever he tells you is a lie*."

Mudd grinned. "Listen carefully, Norman. *I am lying*."

"You. Say. You. Are. Ly-ing. But. If. Everything. You. Say. You. Say. Is. A. Lie. Then. You Are. Tell-ing. The Truth. But. You. Can't tell thetruthbecauseeverything. You sayisalie. But. If. You. Liethatyoulieyoutellthetruth but. You cannot. Foryou 1-i-e."

Little curls of smoke were drifting from Norman's ears. 'Illogical. Illogical–illoglcal–illogical. Explain. You… are… humans. Only… humans… can… ex… plain… please… behavior… ex… plain… ex… plain…"

Kirk strode up to him. With a certain glee, he said, "I am not programmed to respond in that area."

There was a harsh, grating sound. A puff of smoke issued from Norman's nostrils. He stumbled to one side, and his badge faded. He crashed heavily to the floor. Spock hurried to the door and looked out. "They're all immobilized!"

"Pity," said Scott, dusting himself off. "They could have been so useful."

"I've an idea about that, Scotty." Kirk turned to look at the grinning Mudd.

The grin wavered. "Why are you looking at me like that, Captain? Kirk, Kirk, old friend, now let's just talk this over—"

Kirk smiled, showing his teeth. "Bones, Spock, let's get out of here."

They stepped over the fallen androids, and made their way to the Throne Room.

McCoy paused at the doorway. "You must be very unhappy, Spock."

"Unhappy, Doctor? Why should I be unhappy?"

"We found a whole world of minds that work just like yours. Logical, unemotional, completely pragmatic—and we poor, irrational humans beat them in a fair fight. Now you'll be back among us illogical humans again. What a pity!"

"It pleases me greatly, doctor. Nowhere am I so desperately needed as among a shipload of your species."

"Touché for Spock, Bones!" said Kirk, laughing.

Outraged and red in the face, Mudd burst into the Throne Room. "What's this I hear about me having to stay here?" Two Alices followed him.

"Harry," said Kirk, "You are paroled to the custody of the android population of this planet"

Spock nodded. "We have already effected repairs and reprogramming on a number of the androids, Mister Mudd. They, in turn, will repair others."

Mudd glared at Spock. "But if they're fixed, we're right back where we started!"

"No. Part of the original purpose of their presence here was lost when they lost their Makers. They were to begin adapting the planet's surface for productive use. They will begin that work again."

"But what do I do? I'm no farmer."

"No, you're an—irritant, Harry." Kirk smiled. "You'll stay here to give the androids a first-class example of human failure. They'll learn to avoid other humans like you in the future."

"How long?" asked Mudd, crestfallen.

"As long as you remain an irritant. It's up to you, Harry."

Mudd straightened his shoulders, as he looked at the Alices. "Well, I suppose I can manage… what with one thing and another.

At least I'm in touch with the galaxy again." He moved closer to an Alice. "As detention sentences go, this one isn't *uncomfortable*…"

Kirk turned, and started toward the door. "Oh, yes, one thing more. We've had a special android attendant programmed to take care of your personal needs," he said over his shoulder. "It may give you an incentive to work with the androids instead of exploiting them."

Mudd smirked. "Now that's unexpectedly civilized of you, Captain." The smirk suddenly vanished.

Stella, grim-jawed and uncompromising, emerged from a side door. "Harcourt Fenton Mudd, what have you been up to?" it screeched. "*Answer me*!"

"Shut up!" said Mudd frantically. She didn't, Her thin lips tightened over her buck teeth.

From another door, another Stella stalked out, black dress stiffly swaying, arms folded. "You miserable, conniving—out all night again!"

"Shut up!" shrieked Mudd, cowering. "Shut up, I order it!"

"Harcourt Fenton Mudd, you've been overeating !" screeched yet another Stella.

"And drinking!"

"You need my supervision!"

"You always did!"

"I can see I've got my work cut out for me!" chorused Stellas, emerging from all sides.

"Kirk! You can't do this to me! It's inhuman!" Mudd started at Kirk, standing by the door with his officers. Two Stellas caught him, and lifted him by the elbows; his feet scrabbled frantically in mid-air.

"Captain!" he wailed. "You wouldn't!" Stella 600 smiled grimly. "You don't know what you're doing!"

Kirk looked back at him, and grinned.

"Good-bye, Harry. Have fun."

THE TROUBLE WITH TRIBBLES*

(David Gerrold) *Hugo Award nominee

Nobody seems to know where tribbles come from, though obviously they are comfortable in oxygen-bearing air at Earthlike temperatures and pressures. Newborn tribbles are about an inch long; the largest one ever seen, about sixteen inches.

A tribble looks a little like a cross between an angora cat and a beanbag. It has no arms or legs, no eyes, and in fact no face—only a mouth. It moves by rolling, by stretching and flexing like an inchworm, or by a peculiar throbbing which moves it along slowly but smoothly, rather like a snail. It does, however, have long fur, which comes in a variety of colors—beige, deep chocolate, gold, white, gold-green, auburn, cinnamon and dusky yellow.

Tribbles are harmless. Absolutely, totally, completely, categorically, inarguably, utterly, one hundred per cent harmless…

The *Enterprise* picked up a priority A-1 distress call from deep space station K-7 within a few moments after the big ship hove into sensor range. The station orbits Sherman's Planet, which is about three light years from the nearest Klingon outpost and hence well within the Klingon's sphere of influence—or the outpost was well within the Federation's sphere of influence, depending on how you looked at it.

Both sides had claimed the planet. Although it was mostly barren, its position between the two political bodies was of considerable strategic importance. In the old days, one or the other would have grabbed it, and the other would have tried to jockey him off, at constant risk of war—a pastime the Klingons enjoyed.

These days, however, there was the Organian peace treaty to take into account. Under its terms, Sherman's Planet would belong to whichever side could prove it could develop the planet most effectively.

Under the circumstances, when a priority one distress call came from station K-7, the *Enterprise* could not be blamed for making for the station at Warp Six, with all hands at battle stations.

But when the ship arrived there was no target. K-7 rolled majestically and peacefully around Sherman's Planet, menaced—if that is the word—by nothing within sensor range but a one-man scout ship which floated nearby, obviously in parking orbit.

Baffled and irritated, Captain Kirk called the station's Commander Lurry, who refused any explanation except in person. He did so rather apologetically, but this did not placate Kirk in the least. He beamed over to the station with Spock, his First Officer—with orders to Sulu to keep the *Enterprise* at battle readiness.

There were two other men in Commander Lurry's office when Kirk and Spock arrived. Kirk paid no attention to them.

"Commander Lurry," he said, "you have sent out a priority one distress call. Please state the nature of your emergency."

"Uh, Captain, please allow me to explain. We in fact have no emergency, yet."

"Then you are in trouble," Kirk said grimly. "If there is no emergency, why did you order the call?"

One of the two unknowns said, "*I* ordered it, Captain."

"And who are you?"

"Captain Kirk, this is Nilz Baris," Lurry said. "He's out here from Earth to take charge of the development project for Sherman's Planet."

"And that gives you the authority to put a whole quadrant on defense alert?"

"Mr Baris," the second unknown said stiffly, "is the Federation Undersecretary for Agricultural Affairs in this quadrant."

"A position with no military standing of which I am aware," Kirk said. "And who may *you* be, please?"

"This is my assistant, Arne Darvin," Baris said. "Now, Captain, I want all available security guards to…"

"I beg your pardon?" Kirk said. The way this trio had of answering questions for each other was not improving his temper, and thus far he had heard nothing even vaguely resembling an explanation.

"I will try to make myself clear," the Undersecretary said. "I want all available security guards. I want them posted around the warehouse. Surely that's simple enough."

"It's simple but it's far from clear. What warehouse?"

"The warehouse with the quadrotriticale," Darvin said, recapturing the ball. Lifting an attache case to Lurry's desk, he extracted from it a small vial. From this he poured into his palm a few small seeds, which he handed to Baris, who in turn handed them to Kirk. The Captain inspected them briefly and then passed them on to Spock.

"Wheat," he said. "What about it?"

"Quadrotriticale is not wheat, Captain," Darvin said, with an audible sniff. "It is a newly developed form of trititicale."

"That leaves me as much in the dark as before."

"Trititicale is a high-yield per acre hybrid form of wheat and rye," Spock said quietly. "This appears to be a four-lobed rehybridization —a perennial, also, if I'm not mistaken. The root grain, triticale, traces its ancestry back to twentieth-century Canada."

"Uh, yes," Baris said, looking a little startled.

"And it is the only Earth grain that will grow on Sherman's Planet," Commander Lurry put in. "We have a warehouse of it here on the station. It's very important that the grain reach Sherman's Planet safely. Mr Baris thinks that Klingon agents may try to sabotage it."

"Nothing could be more likely," the Undersecretary said. "That grain is going to be the way the Federation proves its claim to Sherman's Planet. Obviously the Klingons will do anything they can to keep it from getting there. It must be protected. Do you understand? It *must* be protected."

"So you issued a priority one distress call on behalf of a warehouse full of grain," Kirk said. "The only reason I don't arrest you on the spot is that I want the Federation to have Sherman's Planet as much as you do. Consider yourself lucky; misuse of the priority one channel is a Federation offense."

"I did not misuse…"

"Captain Kirk," Lurry interposed hurriedly, "couldn't you at least post a couple of guards? We do get a large number of ships passing through."

This of course was true. After a moment, Kirk said, "Mr Spock, what do you think?"

"It would be a logical precaution, Captain."

"Very well." Kirk took out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise…* Lieutenant Uhura, secure from general quarters. Next, beam over *two* security guards. Have them report to Commander Lurry."

"Yes, Captain."

"Also, authorize shore leave for all off-duty personnel. Kirk out."

"Only two?" Baris said, in something very like a fury. "Kirk, you're going to hear about this. I'm going to contact Starfleet Command."

"Do that," Kirk said, staring at the Undersecretary icily. "But before you put in the call, I suggest that you pin back your ears. It will save Starfleet Command the trouble of doing it for you."

The recreation area of K-7 was small, the shops little more than stalls surrounding a central mall formed by the intersection of a number of curving corridors. Space was at a premium.

As Kirk and Spock entered the area, a number of crew members from the *Enterprise* materialized on the mall, including Uhura and Sulu. Kirk moved toward them.

"I see you didn't waste any time getting over here," he said. "Mr Sulu, we have a new specimen for your greenhouse. Mr Spock?" The First Officer handed the grain over. "It's called…"

"Quadrotriticale!" the helmsman said eagerly. "I've read about it, but I've never seen any till now!"

"Come on, Sulu," Uhura said. "You can study it back aboard. Let's get in some shopping while we have the chance. Coming, Mr Spock? Captain?"

"Well, for a few minutes, anyhow. But not for long; I suspect there are some hot messages shooting back and forth in subspace along about now."

The shop into which Uhura led them was vaguely cluttered and did not seem to specialize in anything in particular. Clearly it was one of those broker's establishments where spacemen on leave sold curios they had picked up on far planets, to help pay for their shore leaves—curios later resold to other spacemen for twice the price. This did not look like the best such shop Kirk had ever seen, but then, K-7 was not the best located of space stations, either.

There was nobody else in it at the moment but a tall, raffish-looking red-haired civilian, who had an immense quantity of merchandise spread out over the counter, and a carryall sack at his feet.

"No, absolutely not," the storekeeper was saying. "I've got enough Argilian flame gems to last me a lifetime. At the price I have to ask for them, hardly anybody on this junkyard can afford them."

"How sad for you, my friend," the peddler said. His voice was surprisingly melodious. "You won't see finer stones than mine anywhere. Ah well. Now surely you'll be wanting some Sirian glow water…"

"I use that," the storekeeper said in a deadly monotone, "to polish the flame gems."

The peddler sighed and swept most of his merchandise off the counter into his sack. Only one object was left—a green-gold ball of fluff.

"Ah, you are a most difficult man to reach. All I have left to offer you is tribbles. Surely, you will want…"

"Not at that price."

"Oooh," Uhura said. "What is it? Is it alive? May I hold him? He's adorable."

"What is it?" the peddler said, handing it over. "Why, little darlin', it's a tribble. Only the sweetest little creature known to man—exceptin', of course, yourself."

The object in the lieutenant's hands throbbed gently. Kirk became aware of a low, pervasive sound, like a cross between the thrum of a kitten and the cooing of a dove. "Oh," Uhura said, "it's purring!"

"Ah, little lady, he's just sayin' that he likes you."

"Can I buy him?"

"That," the shopkeeper said, "is what we're trying to decide right now."

"My friend, ten credits apiece is a very reasonable price. You can see for yourself how much the lovely little lady here appreciates fine things. Others will, too."

"One credit," said the storekeeper.

Sulu put his grain on the counter and reached tentatively for the tribble. "He won't bite, will he?" the helmsman said.

"Sir!" the peddler said, making a great show of ignoring the storekeeper's offer. "There is a law against transporting harmful animals from one planet to another, as you as a starship officer must be fully aware. Besides, tribbles have no teeth."

"All right," the shopkeeper said. "Two credits."

The peddler took the tribble from Sulu and plopped it down on the counter again. "Nine," he said.

The shopkeeper eyed the animal dubiously. "Is he clean?"

"He's as clean as you are. I daresay a good deal cleaner."

"If you don't want him, I'll take him," Lt. Uhura said. "I think he's cute."

This set off another round of haggling. The two finally settled on six credits, whereupon the peddler began to produce more tribbles from his sack. Startlingly, no two were the same color or size.

"How much are you selling them for?" Uhura asked the shopkeeper.

"Ten credits. But for you…"

"Hey!" Sulu said suddenly. "He's eating my grain!" He swept up what remained. The tribble's purr got louder, and its non-face went slowly round and round, giving an absurd impression of bliss. The shopkeeper picked it up, but the peddler promptly took it from him.

"Sir," the peddler said. "That one happens to be my sample, which is mine to do with as I please. And I please to give it to the pretty little lady here."

"That's right," said the storekeeper. "Ruin the market."

"My friend," the peddler said, almost singing, "once the pretty little lady here starts to show this little precious around, you won't be able to keep up with 'em. Mark my words."

Lt. Uhura put the faceless ball of fur to her face, cooing alarmingly. Kirk did not know whether to be pleased or scared; Uhura had never shown the faintest sign of sentimentality before, but she seemed to be far gone in gooiness now. To be sure, the baggy little animals were attractive, but…

Queep!

No, that wasn't a tribble; it was his communicator.

"Kirk here."

"Captain, this is Scott. We have a stiff message in from Starfleet Command. I think you'd better deal with it; I don't think I'm authorized."

"All right, Scotty," Kirk told his communicator. "Record and hold. I'll be right over."

"Well and good. But, Captain, that's not all, sir. Our sensors have just picked up a Klingon battle cruiser. It's closing in rapidly on K-7. I've challenged it and gotten a routine acknowledgement; but…"

"Who's in command?" Spock said. Kirk had almost forgotten that he was still in the shop; but as usual, he had asked the crucial question. Kirk passed it on, with a grateful nod to his First Officer.

"Commander Koloth, sir. You'll remember him from our last encounter, Captain; a real, fourteen-karat son of a…"

"I get the message, Scotty. Hold on—and post battle stations. Lieutenant Uhura, pick up your pet; we're back on duty."

He had hardly finished speaking before the *Enterprise's* transporters shimmered them all out of existence.

The message from Starfleet Command was, as usual, brief and pointed. It said: "It is not necessary to remind you of the importance to the Federation of Sherman's Planet. The key to our winning of this planet is the grain, quadrotriticale. The shipment of it must be protected. Effective immediately, you will render any aid and assistance which Undersecretary Baris may require. The safety of the grain—and the project—is your responsibility."

How complicated that was going to be was immediately made clear by the presence of the Klingon ship. It made no move to attack the station; that in fact would have been suicide, since every phaser on board the *Enterprise* was locked on the Klingon vessel (as Koloth, an able captain, would assume as a matter of course). Instead, Koloth stunned everyone by asking for shore leave for his men.

Under the Organian peace treaty, Commander Lurry had no choice but to grant the request. Starfleet, however, had inadvertently given Kirk a card to play, since the phrasing of the message had made the safety of the grain his responsibility. Hence he was able to order that only twelve Klingons be allowed shore leave at a time, and furthermore he beamed over one *Enterprise* security guard for every Klingon. That part of it, he thought, ought to please Baris, at least.

It did not please Baris. He did not want any Klingons on the station, period. He carried on about it quite a lot. In the end, however, it was clear that the Klingons had a right to be there, and nothing could be done about it.

Kirk stopped off at the recreation room for a cup of coffee and a breather. Scott, the engineer, was there reading a technical journal; that was his form of relaxation. Elsewhere, however, a knot of people were gathered around a table, including Spock, Dr McCoy, Uhura and Ensign Freeman. Joining the group, Kirk found that on the table was Uhura's tribble and at least ten smaller ones; the crewmen were playing with them.

"How long have you had that thing, Lieutenant?" McCoy asked Uhura.

"Only since yesterday. This morning, I found that he—I mean *she* had had babies."

"I'd say you got a bargain." McCoy picked up one of the animals and examined it curiously. "Hmmm…"

"Lieutenant Uhura," Kirk said amusedly, "are you running a nursery?"

"I hadn't intended to—but the tribble had other plans."

Spock too was handling one of the creatures, stroking it absent-mindedly.

"You got it at the space station?" McCoy said.

"Yes, from the pilot of that one-man scout ship. Commander Lurry says his name is Cyrano Jones, of all things. He's a system locater, down on his luck."

"Most of them are," Kirk said. "Locating new systems on the margins of Klingon space is a synonym for locating trouble."

"A most curious creature, Captain," Spock said. "Its trilling would seem to have a tranquilizing effect on the human nervous system. Fortunately, I seem to be immune."

Watching his First Officer stroke the animal, Kirk raised an eyebrow, but offered no other comment.

"Lieutenant," McCoy said, "do you mind if I take one of these things down to the lab to find out what makes it tick?"

"It's all right with me, but if you're planning to dissect it, I don't want to know about it."

"Say, Lieutenant," Ensign Freeman said, "if you're giving them away, could I have one too?"

"Sure, why not? They seem to be old enough."

Freeman looked at Kirk. "I don't have any objections to pets on this ship," Kirk said. "Within reason. But if these tribbles want to stay on the *Enterprise,* they'd better be a little less prolific."

The tribbles, however, did not seem to get the message. Visiting sick bay the next day—another prolonged shouting match with Baris had given him a headache—Kirk found that McCoy had what seemed to be a boxful of the creatures.

"I thought Uhura gave you only one of those things, Bones. It looks more like you've got ten here."

"Average litter. I had eleven, but I dissected one. The nearest thing I can figure out is that they're born pregnant."

"Is that possible?"

"No, but it would be a great timesaver, wouldn't it? I can tell you this much: almost fifty per cent of the creature's metabolism is geared to reproduction. Do you know what you get if you feed a tribble too much?"

Kirk's mind was not really on the subject. "A very fat tribble?"

"No. You get a whole bunch of hungry little tribbles. And if you think *that's* a boxful, you should see Uhura's. She's got about fifty, and she gave away five."

"Well, you'd better find homes for this batch before you've got fifty, too." Kirk swallowed the headache pill. "Are you going on shore leave, Bones?"

"Already been. Besides, this problem is more interesting. I understand Scotty went over with the last detachment; he'll see to it that there's no trouble. Unless, of course, the Klingons start it."

"I can't see why they'd want to do that. Koloth knows that if there is any, I'd promptly double the number of guards. If he's really after the grain, that's the last thing he'd want."

Nevertheless, after his next interview with Lurry, Kirk troubled to make a detour through the space station's bar. There were six Earthmen there, Scotty and Navigator Chekov among them. Five or six Klingons were at another table, but the two groups were studiously ignoring each other.

As Kirk joined his own men, Cyrano Jones entered the bar and also moved toward them. "Ah, friends," he said, "can I interest you in a tribble?"

He was holding one at Scott's shoulder. Scott turned toward him and found himself looking straight into the tribble's absence of a face. He shuddered.

"I've been puffin' the little beasties out of my engine room all morning!"

"Perhaps one of you other gentlemen—?" There was no response. With a fatalistic shrug, Cyrano went over to the Klingon table, approaching one whom Kirk recognized as Korax, one of Koloth's officers.

"Friend Klingon, may I offer you a charmin' little tribble…"

The tribble had other ideas. All its fur stood on end. It hitched itself up Cyrano's forearm with an angry spitting hiss.

"Stop that!" Cyrano said. "Apologies for his bad manners, sir. He's never done that before."

"I suggest," Korax said coldly, "that you remove yourself and that parasite as speedily as possible."

"It's only a friendly little…"

"Take it away!"

There was another hiss from the tribble. Korax slapped Cyrano's arm away, sending the tribble flying across the room to land

among the Earthmen. Cyrano rushed to retrieve it; Scotty handed it to him without a word.

After looking from one group to the other, Cyrano, somewhat disconsolately, retreated to the bar, where the counterman was taking down a pitcher from a high shelf, and put his beast down on the counter.

"Sir! I feel sure that you would be willin' to engage in a little barter—one of my little tribbles in exchange for a spot of…"

The attendant turned, and upended the pitcher. Three tribbles fell out of it.

It was worse on shipboard. The corridors seemed to be crawling with the creatures. On the bridge, Kirk had to scoop three or four of them out of his chair before he could sit down. They were all over the consoles, on shelves, everywhere.

"Lieutenant, how did all of these tribbles get onto the bridge?"

"Through the ventilator ducts, I expect, Captain. They seem to be all over the ship."

"They certainly do. Mr Spock, have a maintenance crew come up here to clean out this bridge. How many of them are there now, anyhow?"

"Assuming one creature—the one Lieutenant Uhura brought aboard—with an average litter of ten," the First Officer said, "every twelve hours. The third generation will total one thousand, three hundred thirty-one. The fourth generation will total fourteen thousand, six hundred and forty-one. The fifth generation will…"

"That's already enough. I want a thorough cleanup. They've got to go."

"All of them?" Lt. Uhura said protestingly. "Oh, Captain…"

"Every last one."

"A logical decision," Spock said. "Their breeding rate is beyond our control. They are consuming our supplies and returning nothing."

"Oh, come on now, Mr Spock. I don't agree with you at all. They're giving us their love. Cyrano Jones says that a tribble is the only love money can buy."

"Lieutenant," Kirk said, "too much of anything—even love—is not necessarily a good thing. And in view of the fact that this all started with just one tribble, clearly the only safe number is none."

"And since feeding them is what makes them breed," Spock added, "one need only imagine what would happen if they got into the food processing machinery, or the food storage areas."

Kirk stared at the First Officer, thunderstruck. "Storage areas!" he said. "Great thundering fireballs! *Storage areas!* Lieutenant Uhura, contact Commander Lurry, and Nilz Baris. Have them meet us at the station mall. Mr Spock, we're beaming over. Lieutenant, have Doctor McCoy join us in the transporter room—on the double!"

When the three materialized on the mall, half a dozen tribbles materialized with them. The mall did not need any more, however; it was inundated. The store where they had seen their very first tribble looked like a snowbank of fur. The storekeeper, who had evidently just given up an attempt to sweep them out, was sitting in the midst of them with his head in his hands, close to tears.

Lurry and Baris came running to meet them—for once, without Darvin. "What's the matter?" Baris panted.

"Plenty—if what I think has happened, has happened. The warehouse, quick!"

Baris needed no further urging. They left at a dead run, kicking tribbles out of the way.

There were two guards before the warehouse door. "Is that door secure?" Kirk demanded.

"Yes, sir. Nothing could get in."

"Open it."

The guard produced a magnetic key. Nothing happened. "Don't understand it, sir. It seems to be…"

What it seemed to be will never be known, for at that moment the door slid open. There was a sort of silent explosion. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of tribbles came tumbling out, cascading down around them all, wriggling and seething and mewling and writhing and throbbing and trilling and purring…

They stood aghast as the mountain of fur grew. Spock recovered first. Scooping up a tribble, he examined it with clinical detachment. "It seems to be gorged," he observed.

"Gorged!" Baris gasped. "On my grain! Kirk! I'll hold you responsible! There must be thousands—hundreds of thousands!"

"One million, five hundred and sixty-one thousand, seven hundred and seventy-three," Spock said, "assuming, of course, that they got in here three days ago, and allowing for the maximum rate of grain consumption *and* the volume of the warehouse."

"What does the exact number matter?" Baris said despairingly. "The Klingons will get Sherman's Planet now!"

"I'm afraid," Kirk said slowly, "that you're right about that."

McCoy had been kneeling among the tribbles, examining them closely. At this point he looked up.

"Jim?"

"What is it, Bones?"

"Mr Spock is wrong about these animals. They're not lethargic because they're gorged. They're dying."

"Dying! Are you sure?"

"I venture to say," McCoy replied with dignity, "that nobody on this station knows their metabolism better than I do. Yes, I am sure."

"All right," Kirk said with sudden energy. "Bones, take some of them back to your lab, and some of the grain, too. If they're dying, I want to know why. Then report back to me. I'm opening a formal hearing and investigation. Commander Lurry, I presume we can use your office. I'll want your assistant, and Captain Koloth—and Cyrano Jones, too."

"What good will that do?" Bans said. "The project is ruined—ruined!"

"Regulations require it," Kirk said. "And as for the project—well, that remains to be seen."

The scene in Lurry's office strongly resembled that moment in the classical detective novel when all the suspects are lined up and the shrewd sleuth eliminates all the obvious suspects and puts his finger on the butler. Lurry was seated behind his desk; nearby, in the visitor's chair, sat Cyrano Jones, stroking a tribble in his lap. Standing, with various degrees of uneasiness, interest or defiance, were Koloth, Korax, another Klingon aide, Spock, Baris, and McCoy, with Kirk facing them. And there were, of course, several security guards standing by. The Klingon captain spoke first: "I had heard that you Earthers were sentimental about these parasites," he said, "but this is carrying things too far. I want an official apology from you, Kirk, addressed to the High Command of the Klingon Empire. You have restricted the shore leave of my men, harassed them with uniformed snoopers, and now summon us here like common criminals. If you wish to avoid a diplomatic crisis…"

"Don't do it, Kirk!" Baris burst in. "That'll give them the final wedge they need to claim Sherman's Planet!"

"Oh, as to *that* matter," Koloth said silkily, "it would seem that the outcome is already settled."

"One thing at a time," Kirk said. "Our present job is to find out who is responsible for the tribbles getting into the quadrotriticale. The Klingons have an obvious motive. On the other hand, it was Cyrano Jones who brought them here, apparently with purely commercial intent. There's no obvious connection."

"Beggin' your pardon, Captain," Cyrano said, "but a certain amount of the blame might be lyin' in sheer ignorance of the little creatures. If you keep their diet down below a certain intake per day, why sure and they don't breed at all. That's how I control mine."

Kirk stared at him. "Why didn't you tell us that before?"

"Nobody asked me. Besides, Captain, any man's common sense should tell him that it's bad for little animals to be overfeedin' 'em."

"Let that pass for the moment. We also need to find out what killed the tribbles. Was the grain poisoned—and if so, who poisoned it?"

He looked fixedly at Koloth, but the Klingon only smiled. "I had no access to it, obviously," he said. "Your guards were watching me every instant. However, Captain, before we go on—would you mind very much having that thing taken out of here?"

He pointed at the tribble in Cyrano's lap. Kirk hesitated a moment, but he could in fact sympathize; he had himself seen enough tribbles to last him a lifetime. He gestured to a guard, who lifted the creature gingerly and moved toward the door.

At the same moment, the door opened and Darvin entered belatedly. The tribble fluffed itself up and spat.

Kirk stared at it a moment in disbelief. Then, taking it from the crewman, he crossed over to Korax and held it out; it spat again. It spat at the third Klingon, too, and at Koloth. However it purred for everyone else, even including Baris—oh well, Kirk thought, there's no accounting for some people's tastes—and it went into a positive ecstasy over Spock, to the First Officer's rigidly controlled distaste. Then back to Darvin. *Hisssss!*

"Bones!" Kirk barked. "Check this man!"

McCoy was already at Darvin's side, tricorder out. He ran it over the man twice.

"It figures, Jim," he said. "Heartbeat all wrong, body temperature—well, never mind the details. He's a Klingon, all right."

The security men closed on Damn. "Well, well," Kirk said. "What do you think Starfleet Command will have to say about this, Mr Baris? Bones, what did you find out about the grain?"

"Oh. It wasn't poisoned. It was infected."

"Infected," Baris repeated in a dull voice. He seemed past reacting to any further shock.

"Yes. It had been sprayed with a virus which practices metabolic mimicry. You see, the molecules of the nutriments the body takes in fit into the molecules of the body itself like a key into a lock. This virus mimics the key—but it isn't a nutriment itself. It blocks the lock so the proper nutriments can't get in. A highly oversimplified explanation, but good enough for the purpose."

"Do I mean you to imply," Kirk said, "that the tribbles starved to death? A whole warehouse full of grain, and they starved in the midst of it?"

"That's essentially it," McCoy agreed. "And would this have happened to any *men* who ate the grain?"

"It would happen to any warm-blooded creature. The virus is very catholic in its tastes—like rabies."

"I observe another possible consequence," Spock said. "Dr McCoy, could the virus be killed without harming the grain?"

"I think so."

"In that case," Spock said, "Mr Darvin's attempt at mass murder has done us all a favor, and so have Mr Jones' tribbles."

"I don't follow you, Mr Spock," Kirk said. "A simple logical chain, Captain. The virus without doubt prevented the tribbles from completely gutting the warehouse; fully half the grain must be left. On the other hand, the tribbles enabled us to find that the grain was infected without the loss of a single human life."

"I don't think the Federation courts will count that much in Mr Darvin's favor, Mr Spock, but it's a gain for us, I agree. Guards, take him out. Now, Captain Koloth, about that apology—you have six hours to get your ship out of Federation territory."

Koloth left, stiffly and silently. The tribble hissed after him.

"I hate to say this," Kirk said, "but you almost have to love tribbles just for the enemies they make. Now, Mr Jones. Do you know what the penalty is for transporting an animal that is proven dangerous to human life? It is twenty years."

"Ah, now, Captain Kirk," Cyrano said, almost in tears. "Surely we can come to some form of mutual understanding? After all, as Mr Spock points out, my little tribbles did tip you off to the infection in the grain—and they proved a most useful Geiger counter for detecting the Klingon agent."

"Granted," Kirk said gravely. "So if there's one task you'll undertake, I won't press charges, and when you're through with it, Commander Lurry will return your scout ship to you. If you'll remove every tribble from this space station…"

Cyrano gasped. "Remove every tribble? Captain, that'll take years!"

"Seventeen point nine years," Spock said, "to be exact."

"Think of it as job security," Kirk suggested.

"It's either this—or charges? Ah, Captain, you're a hard man—but I'll do it."

There was not a single tribble about the *Enterprise* when the party returned. It proved rather difficult to find out how this miracle had been brought about, but Scotty finally admitted to it.

"But how did you do it?"

"Oh, I just had the cleanup detail pile them all into the transporter."

"But—Scotty, you didn't just transport them out into space, did you?"

The engineer looked offended. "Sir, I'm a kindhearted man. I gave them a good home, sir."

"Where? Spit it out, man!"

"I gave them to the Klingons, sir. Just before they went into warp, I transported the whole kit and kaboodle into their engine room. And I trust, sir, that all their tribbles will be big ones."

BREAD AND CIRCUSES

(Gene Roddenberry and Gene L. Coon)

There was no doubt about it. The space debris spotted by the *Enterprise* scanners was all that was left of the *Beagle*, an S.S. survey vessel posted as missing for six years. A mixture of personal belongings and portions of instrumentation, the floating junk contained no evidence of human bodies. The conclusion was plain to Kirk. The *Beagle's* crew had managed to beam down to a planet before catastrophe had destroyed their ship.

"Mr Chekov," he said, "compute present drift of the wreckage."

"Computed and on the board, sir."

Kirk glanced at the figures. Then he rose and went to his Science officer. "Mr Spock, assuming that stuff has been drifting at the same speed and direction for six years…?"

Spock completed a reading on his library computer. "It would have come from planet four in Star System eight nine two, directly ahead, Captain."

Chekov called. "Only one-sixteenth parsec away, sir. We could be there in seconds!"

Kirk nodded to him. "Standard orbit around the planet There may be survivors there, Mr Chekov."

Spock had more information on the lost *Beagle*. "She was a small Class Four stardrive vessel, crew of forty-seven, commanded by—" He withdrew his head from his hooded viewer. "I believe you know him, sir. Captain R. M. Merrick."

"Yes, at the Academy." It had been a long time ago; and it wasn't too pleasant a memory at that. Merrick had been dropped in his fifth year. Rumor had it he'd gone into the merchant service. True or false, he'd known him. If, by some chance, Merrick was down there, abandoned on that star…

Kirk turned to the bridge screen. They were coming up on the planet. The pinpoint of light it had been was enlarging, growing rounder, transforming itself into a bluish ball, not unlike Earth. But the oceans and land masses were different.

He said so and Spock shook his head. "In shape only, Captain. The proportion of land to water is exactly as on your home planet. Density 5.5… diameter 7917 at the equator… atmosphere 78% nitrogen, 21% oxygen. Again, exactly like Earth." He looked up, gesturing to his viewer-computer. "And I picked up indications of large cities."

"Development?" Kirk said.

"No signs of atomic energy yet. But far enough along for radio communications, power transportation, an excellent road system."

Uhura slewed around from her station. "Captain! I think I can pick up something visual! A 'news broadcast' using a system I believe was once called 'video'."

" 'Television' was the colloquial word," Spock observed.

"Put it on the screen, Lieutenant," Kirk said. For a moment the bridge viewer held only the picture of the planet at orbital distance. Then, as Uhura made a new adjustment, the picture dissolved into the image of a city street—one that, apart from some subtle differences, could have been a city street of Earth's 1960's. Clearly a newscast, the scene showed onlookers in clothes of the period watching police herd up a small group of people in loin cloths.

An announcer's voice, filtered, spoke from the screen.

"? and in the Forum District today, police rounded up still another collection of dissidents. Authorities are as yet unable to explain these fresh outbreaks of treasonable disobediences by well-treated, well-protected slaves…"

A shocked, amazed silence fell over the *Enterprise* bridge. But the bland announcer-voice went on. "And now, turning to the world of sports, we bring you taped reports of the arena games last night…"

Two men appeared on the Starship's screen. They were naked except for leather aprons. Helmeted, carrying oblong shields, they were armed with ancient Roman swords. They advanced toward each other. One attacked—and the announcer's voice said, "The first heat involved amateurs, a pair of petty thieves from city prison. Conducted, however, with traditional weapons, it provided some amusement for a few moments…"

The attacker saw his chance. He lunged, driving his sword into the heart of his opponent. To a background of noisy cheers, he stepped back from the bloody body, raising his sword in salute to the arena's galleries. Over the cheers, the announcer said, "The winner will meet another contestant in tonight's games. In the

second heat we'll have a more professional display in the spirit of our splendid past, when gladiator Claudius Marcus killed the last of the barbarians, William B. Harrison, in an excellent example of…"

Static crashed. The picture faded to be replaced by the planet view.

An appalled Uhura, collecting herself, said, "Transmission lost, Captain. Shall I try to get it back?"

Kirk didn't answer. Instead, both puzzled and astounded, he turned to Spock. "Slaves and gladiators? Some kind of Twentieth-century Rome?"

Spock's face was unusually, grave as he lifted it from his computer. "Captain, the man described as the 'barbarian' is also listed here—Flight Officer William B. Harrison of the S.S. *Beagle*. At least there *were* survivors down there."

A landing party. There was no alternative. Kirk wheeled. "Ready the Transporter Room, Mr Sulu."

They arrived at the base of a shallow canyon. Glancing up at the rocky overhang, Kirk said, "You could have selected a more attractive place, Mr Spock."

His first officer was already taking tricorder readings. "Practical, however, Captain. Unpopulated but close to that city we saw. We should not be observed." He looked up from his instrument. "Fascinating how similar is this atmosphere to. your Twentieth century's! Moderately industrialized pollution containing substantial amounts of carbon monoxide and partially consumed hydrocarbons."

McCoy said, "The word was 'smog'."

"I believe that *was* the term, Doctor. I had no idea you were such a historian."

"I'm not. I just wanted to stop you before we got the whole lecture. Jim, do we know anything at all about this planet?"

Kirk shook his head. "The *Beagle* was doing the first survey on this star sector when it disappeared."

"Then the 'prime directive' is in full effect, Captain."

"Yes, Mr Spock. 'No identification of self or mission; no interference with social development of said planet'."

McCoy nodded ruefully. "No references to space, to other worlds or more advanced civilizations." He grinned. "Once, just once, I'd like to land someplace and say, 'Behold, I am the Archangel Gabriel'…"

Spock cocked a brow at Kirk's chuckle. "I fail to see any humor in such a masquerade."

McCoy eyed him. "I guess because you could hardly claim to be an angel. But with those ears, Spock, if you landed somewhere carrying a *pitchfork*…"

A rifle cracked. Its bullet kicked up the dust at Kirk's feet—and a male voice said, "Don't move! Hands in the air!"

"Complete Earth parallel," Spock remarked, "The language here is English…"

The second shot struck close to his feet.

"I said don't move!" the voice shouted.

"I think he means it, Mr Spock," Kirk said.

Spock looked down at the bullet mark. "That would seem to be evident, sir."

They raised their hands. Above their heads, gravel scuffed to the sound of approaching feet. A big, burly man leaped down from the overhang. Three other men followed him. All wore ragged "slave" loincloths and the alert look of fugitives. Though their rifles were conventionally old-fashioned, they used them skillfully to cover the *Enterprise* trio. Their uniforms seemed to anger the big man. He glared at them with hostility and suspicion.

"Who are you?" he said.

Kirk spoke. "We come from another—'province'."

The man was staring at Spock's ears. "Where are *you* from? Are those ears?"

"I call them ears," Spock told him mildly.

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Never," Spock assured him. He spoke to Kirk. "Colloquial Twentieth-century English. Truly an *amazing* parallel."

Their captor was clearly baffled. Kirk undertook to enlighten him. "We come from a place quite a distance from here. I doubt if you've ever heard—"

He was interrupted. Pointing to their clothing, the big leader turned to his men. "Uniforms. Probably some new Praetorian Guard unit." His eyes went back to Kirk. "I should kill you here and now… but Septimus would probably be displeased. You can take your hands down. Our rifles are at your backs. Move on!" He gestured ahead of them.

They obeyed. After about twenty minutes of hard slugging over the rocky terrain, a man in a tattered loin-cloth stepped from behind a boulder, rifle at the ready.

"Praetorian spies," the big man told him. "I'm taking them to Septimus."

They were prodded through an entrance of a cave. In its dimness they saw that it held a number of people, the men loinclothed, the women in coarse tunics. At sight of the strangers, they all gathered around an elderly man. Under his gray hair, his features were distinguished and benign.

"I didn't harm them, Septimus," the big man said. "Much as I wanted to."

He received a quiet nod of approval. "Keep always in your mind, Flavius, that our way is peace."

McCoy spoke. "For which we are grateful. We are men of peace ourselves."

"Ah? Are you also children of the sun?"

McCoy hesitated. "If you mean a worship of some sort, we represent many beliefs…"

"There is only one true belief!" Flavius shouted. "They are Roman butchers sent by the First Citizen!"

Kirk addressed him directly. "Are we like any Roman you ever saw?"

"Then are you slaves like ourselves?" Septimus asked.

"No. Our people do not believe in slavery."

Flavius cried, "A Roman lie! We must kill them, Septimus!"

Spock stepped forward. "Sir, we have come here looking for some friends. Forty-seven of them who…" he paused, the "prime directive" in mind… "were 'stranded' here six years ago. They wore clothing similar to ours. Have you heard of such men?"

Nobody had. Flavius, still suspicious, said, "Septimus, I know killing is evil but sometimes it's necessary!"

"No."

"They've located our hiding-place! It's better that a few of them die than all of us!"

One of Flavius' men spoke up. "He's right, Septimus. I don't care for myself, but I've brought my wife here, too, my children : . ."

"If they don't die, Septimus, it's the same as if you killed us all yourself!"

Flavius rallied more shouts of agreement. Kirk could see that Septimus was wavering. Rifles were lifting. "Wait," he said. "I can prove we're telling the truth! A small device, Flavius. I'll bring it out slowly…"

Fingers were on triggers as he carefully reached for his communicator. He held it out so that it could be openly seen. Then, very slowly, he opened it and placed it to his lips. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Come in…"

Scott's filtered voice was audible in the cave's sudden silence. "Scott here, Captain."

"Lock in on my transmission. Scan us."

"Scanning, sir."

"Including ourselves, how many people in this cave?"

"Twelve, Captain."

Flavius and Septimus looked quickly around, counting. There were indeed twelve people in the cave. Astonished, they looked at Kirk. He smiled at them.

"Maintain scanning, Scotty: we'll continue checking in. Kirk out." He closed the communicator, turning to Septimus. "The *Enterprise* is our vessel… sailing out at sea. The voice belongs to one of my crew. That's all I can tell you. If it's not sufficient, then I suppose you'll have to kill us."

Rifles were lowering. Septimus, impressed, spoke to Flavius. "Tell me the Empire has an instrument like that—and you can kill them. Otherwise, accept them as friends."

The tension subsided. A woman came forward, offering a pannikin of milk to Kirk. He smiled at her, drank it and seized his first chance to take in the cave. The beds of the truant slaves were rough-hewn rock ledges. What furniture their retreat contained was equally primitive, battered pots and pans—the crude necessities of their harsh existence. Yet the *Enterprise* men were beginning to feel at ease in the cave. Perhaps it was due to the abruptly warm friendliness of the people's effort to make amends for their original reception of the guests.

It was difficult to credit the way they lived to their era. Telecasts —and that rough log table with its torn magazines and newspapers. Was this star a strange example of Hodgkins Law of parallel planet development? A world much like his own back in the Twentieth century—that was undeniable. But on this odd "Earth," Rome never fell. It survived; and was apparently ruled by emperors who could trace their line back to the Caesars of two thousand years ago.

The fate of the *Beagle* crew uppermost in his mind, Kirk approached Septimus again. But the old man shook his head. "No, Captain. I'm sure I would have heard of the arrival of other men like you."

Kirk persisted. "Have you heard… let's say, an impossible story about men coming from the sky? Or from other worlds?"

Septimus smiled. "There are no other worlds."

"The stars…"

"Lights shining through from heaven. It is where the sun is. Blessed be the sun."

"Yes, of course. Excuse me…" Spock, holding a magazine, had beckoned. It was titled *The Gallian*; and its cover was the photograph of a gladiator, fully armed with sword, shield, breastplate and helmet. The caption under the picture read, the new heavyweight champion.

Kirk, leafing through it, came on a colored drawing of a sleek automobile. The ad copy told him its name and purpose. It said: the Jupiter eight for royal comfort.

"Fascinating," Spock said.

"The Jupiter Eight. Conventional combustion engine… you were right about that smog, Spock. But Jupiter cars? And here's Mars Toothpaste… Neptune Bath Salts…"

"Taken from the names of false gods," Septimus said. "When I was a Senator, I worshiped them, too… but I heard the, words of the Sun. I became a brother. For that they made me a slave."

"Septimus… will you help us?" Kirk said. "We must go into the city. We know that one of our missing friends was seen there recently…"

"My advice to you is to leave this place… to go back where you came from."

"We can't do that. Perhaps you have heard this name. 'Merrick' or 'Captain Merrick'?"

Septimus backed away, his face changing. Kirk was suddenly aware of Flavius' watchful eyes.

"Merikus?" Septimus said.

"Merrick. The leader of our friends…"

"Merikus is First Citizen!" Flavius cried. "Butcher!"

"It could not be the same man," Kirk told him. "Captain Merrick is no butcher."

Spock interposed. "A logical question if I may, Captain." He addressed Septimus. "How many years ago did this Merikus become First Citizen?"

"Perhaps five years…"

"Almost six!" Flavius was openly hostile now. "I was there when he became Lord of the Games! If he is your friend, you are no friends of ours!"

Kirk thought fast. "Septimus, it is one of our most important laws that none of us may interfere in the affairs of others. If Merrick is Merikus, he is in violation of that law! He will be taken away and punished. Help us find out the truth of this!"

"I must discuss it with the others," Septimus said. Beckoning to Flavius, he moved away to his people, leaving the *Enterprise* men alone.

Spock said, "Curious, Captain. The similarity of the names. Were you told why Merrick was dropped from the Space Academy?"

"He failed a psycho-simulator test. All it takes is a split second of indecision." He shook his head. "Hardly the kind who becomes a strongman butcher."

"Odd that these people worship the sun," McCoy said.

"Why, Doctor?"

"Because, my dear Spock, it's *illogical*. Rome had no sun worshipers. Why would they parallel Rome in every way but that?"

"Hold it," Kirk said. He had seen Septimus and Flavius returning.

"We have decided," the old man announced. "Flavius will guide you. We will provide you with suitable clothing. But I caution you—take great care. The police are everywhere. May the blessings of the sun be upon you."

A woman shyly approached Spock, a worn scarf in her hand. He understood. Stooping, he waited until she had bound it around his ears.

The outskirts of the city made good ambush country, rough, wooded, brushy. At a thick copse of low-branched trees, Flavius signaled for a halt. "We wait here until dark," he said. "The police seek everywhere."

"Were you a slave, too, Flavius?" Kirk asked.

The big man straightened proudly. "You are barbarians, indeed, not to know of Flavius Maximus. For seven years, I was the most successful gladiator in the province."

"Then you heard the word of the sun?"

"Yes. The words of peace and freedom. It was not easy for me to believe. I was trained to fight But the words were true."

"There are many other things I would—" Kirk broke off as the ex-gladiator held up his hand, alarm leaping into his face. "Quickly…"

"Hold! Don't move! Hands in the air!"

There was a warning rattle of machine-gun fire. Bullets tore leaves from the trees. A half-dozen policemen broke from cover, all armed with oddly-shaped submachine guns. Yet, topping their uniforms were Roman helmets, and at the waist of each hung a short Roman sword. Their leader stepped in close, his hard face cold. "Four fleeing fish! A fine haul—" He stopped. Staring at Flavius, he shouted, "By all the gods, Flavius Maximus!"

With a muffled oath, Flavius lunged at him. One of the others struck him down with the butt of his gun. The *Enterprise* men, directly under the guns, were unable to move. The hard-jawed leader grinned as he looked down at Flavius. "You have been too long absent from the games," he said. "The First Citizen will be pleased."

He nodded his head toward the Starship three. His men shook them down, removing their phasers, communicators, Spock's tricorder and McCoy's medikit.

"What are these things?" he demanded.

Kirk shook his head slightly, signaling silence. The policeman took another curious look at the equipment. . Then, shaking his head, he said, "No matter. Escaped slaves are welcome, whatever the circumstances." Spock's head scarf caught his eye. He ripped it off. For a moment, he stared at the Vulcan ears in wonder. He shrugged the wonder off.

"Not escaped slaves," he said. "Barbarians. A good day's work. It's a long time since I watched barbarians die in the arena."

Apparently, the arena's vestibule was a jail's cell. Shoved into one, Kirk's first act was to shake its bars. The policeman outside struck his hands away from them, cutting his knuckles. But Kirk had succeeded in attracting special attention. "Tell Merikus we want to see him," he told the man.

"The First Citizen? Why would he bother with arena bait like you?"

"Tell him it's James Kirk. Perhaps a friend of his."

The man laughed. " 'Perhaps' is right."

"Suppose I am a friend and you didn't tell him? Do you really care to risk that?"

He received a glare, a grunt—and the policeman walked off to join his men.

Time ambled by. Kirk watched McCoy doing what was possible for Flavius' head gash. When the wound had stopped bleeding, he said, "Tell me, Flavius. If there have been slaves for over two thousand years, haven't there always been discontents, runaways?"

Flavius sat up. "Long ago there were rebellions. But they were suppressed. And with each century the slaves acquired more rights under the law. They received the right to medicine, to government payments in their old age." He shrugged. "They finally learned to be content."

Spock looked up from a stone bench. "Yet more fascinating. Slavery evolving into guaranteed medical care, old age pensions…"

"Quite logical, I'd say, Mr Spock," McCoy said. "Just as it's logical that a Twentieth-century Rome would use television to show its gladiator contests, or name a new car the Jupiter Eight or—"

Spock interrupted. "Were I able to show emotion, Doctor, your new infatuation with the term 'logical' would begin to annoy me."

"Medical men are trained in logic, Mr Spock!"

"Your pardon, Doctor. I had no idea they were trained. From watching you I assumed it was trial and error."

Flavius eyed them. "Are they enemies, Captain?"

Kirk smiled. "I'm not sure they're sure." He returned to the absorbing subject of this extraordinary half-Rome place. "But, Flavius, when the slaves began to worship the sun, they became discontented again. When did all this begin?"

"Long ago. Perhaps as long ago as the beginning of the Empire. But the message of the sun was kept from us."

"That all men are brothers?"

Flavius nodded. "Perhaps I'm a fool to believe it. It does often seem that a man must fight to live."

"No," Kirk said. "You go on believing it, Flavius. All men are brothers."

Footsteps sounded outside the cell. The wolfish policeman, his men behind him, unlocked the barred door. "Flavius Maximus! Your old friends are waiting for you. You are already matched for the morning games. Come!"

Flavius spoke quietly. "I will not fight. I am a brother of the sun."

A cynical grin lifted the man's lips from his teeth. "Put a sword in your hand—and you'll fight. I know you, Flavius. You're as peaceful as a bull."

His men had their submachine guns. Two of them, flanking Flavius, marched him out of the cell. The police chief, with his two remaining guards, gestured to the others. "You three… come with us!"

Kirk, lowering his voice for Spock and McCoy, said, "Three and three. We may never have a better—"

"No talking!" the police chief barked. "Outside now!"

Kirk pointed to McCoy. "I doubt he can walk far. He feels ill."

"I do?" said McCoy.

"He'll die of something if he doesn't step out of this cell right now!"

Kirk's purpose had suddenly dawned on McCoy. He went along with it. "No, I think I can walk. I'll try, anyway…"

The three, exchanging glances, silently agreed it was to be now or never.

The guards closed in around them. Halfway down the' outside corridor, McCoy moaned, "*Uhhh… my stomach*…" He doubled up, his knees buckling to heart-rending groans of pain. A guard grabbed him to pull him back upright; and Spock, with a show of assisting the man, managed to get a hand on his shoulder. The guard crumpled under the Vulcan neck pinch. At the same instant Kirk's clenched fist lashed out. It caught the police chief on the button. He spun around and fell. Coming up fast from his crouch, McCoy downed the third man. Two of the guards tried to struggle up. For their pains they got a couple of space karate chops and subsided into unconsciousness.

A voice said, "Well done, Jim."

The *Enterprise* men wheeled.

The door at the corridor's end had opened. Kirk recognized the man standing inside it. It was Merrick. The ex-captain of the S.S. *Beagle* had always been handsome; and passing time had added strength to what had been merely a goodlooking Space Academy cadet. He wore a richly tailored sports jacket and slacks of a princely elegance. Yet, despite the strength and the clothes, Kirk thought he detected a look of haunting tragedy in his eyes. Beside him was a smaller, plump man, softish, also fashionably tailored.

They hadn't come alone. Behind them were ranged policemen, all armed with submachine guns.

Merrick said, "But it isn't that easy, Jim. They've been handling slaves for two thousand years."

The smaller man beside him turned. "But it was exciting, Merik. They'd do well in the arena."

Kirk hadn't recovered from the shock of recognition. "Bob Merrick! It is you…"

"Me, Merik." He indicated the massed guards behind him. "And them. Not to mention them…" He pointed to the opposite end of the corridor. It was crowded with more armed guards.

The smaller man spoke again. "But this is no place for a reunion."

The hand Kirk had known as Bob Merrick's waved them to follow. "This way, Jim . . , your friends, too. Lots to talk about, lots to explain, to—"

Kirk eyed him. "Yes," he said quickly. "I agree."

Merik made an impatient gesture. "Don't judge me without the facts. Come along. We'll be able to talk freely. The Proconsul here knows who and what we are."

They left. And the guards moved in to make sure that the *Enterprise* three followed them.

It was a lush apartment into which the trio was marched. Marble columns supported a ceiling of mosaic that depicted nymphs disporting with satyrs. A fountain of colored water flung its spray up and back into a seashell of marble. Tufted couches of gleaming stuff were arranged about the room, low tables beside them. All four of the chamber's walls bore painted murals of old Roman gods at their pleasures. Young women—slaves chosen and bought for their loveliness—were moving to the tables with gold platters of fruit and sweetmeats.

The plump Proconsul, wine goblet in hand, greeted them. Merik, an easy host in his sleek sports jacket, waved the guards out of the room.

Smiling at Kirk, he said, "This is a personal affair, isn't it, Jim? A celebration. Old friends meeting."

The Proconsul spoke to the slaves. "Wine for our friends. They have come from a great distance, eh, Captain Kirk?" He grinned broadly. "A very great distance. I am Claudius Marcus, Proconsul."

He approached Spock. "So this is a Vulcan. Interesting. From what I've heard, I wish I had fifty of you for the arena."

Merik said hastily, "And this other is your ship's surgeon?"

"Dr McCoy," Kirk said tersely.

Merik spoke to Claudius. "A pity we can't turn him loose in your hospitals. The level of medicine here might benefit."

One of the girls was proffering a tray to Claudius. "You must be hungry," he told Kirk. "Do try the sparrows broiled with garum. Delicious. Or the roast kid." He jerked a thumb toward the girl. "Drusilla. A lovely thing, isn't she? Noticeable."

So he'd been caught staring at her. She was indeed noticeable. Blond hair, dark eyes—and in the violet, peplum-like gown she wore, every movement of her slender body was grace itself. Flushing, Kirk turned to Merik. "What happened to your ship?" he said.

"Meteor damage. I—" A slave was passing and he paused before he said, "I 'came ashore' with a landing parry for iridium ore and repairs. Then I met Claudius…"

"Go on," Kirk said.

"He convinced me it was unfair to this world to carry word of its existence elsewhere."

"Contamination," Claudius said. "We can't risk that You'll understand as you learn more about us, Kirk."

"I made… the decision to stay," Merik said.

"What happened to your crew? Did they voluntarily beam—" Kirk corrected himself, "—come ashore?"

"This is an ordered world, Jim. Conservative, based on time-honored Roman strengths and virtues."

"What happened to your crew?"

"There has been no war here for over four hundred years, Jim. Could your land of the same era make the same boast? Certainly, they don't want this stability contaminated with dangerous ideas about other ways and other places."

"Interesting," Spock said. "And given a conservative empire, Captain, quite understandable."

McCoy was horrified. "Spock, are you out of your head?" he demanded.

"Doctor, I said I understood. I find the checks and balances of this civilization quite illuminating. It does seem to have escaped the carnage of your first three World Wars."

"Spock, they have *slavery, despotism, gladiatorial games…!*"

Imperturbable as usual, the Vulcan said, "Situations quite familiar to the six million who died in your First World War, Doctor—the eleven million who died in your Second, the thirty-seven million in your Third. Shall I go on?"

"Interesting," Claudius commented. "And you, Captain… which world do you prefer?".

"My world," Kirk said, "is my vessel, my oath and my crew, Proconsul." He turned to Merik. "What happened to your vessel, you've answered. What happened to your oath is obvious."

Merik didn't flinch. "As to my men, Kirk, those who can't adapt to a world always die."

The words were called for. Kirk said them. "You sent your own people to the arena." It was a statement, not a question—a statement defining an unbridgeable gulf between life values. Yes, Merik's eyes *were* haunted. And he would be forever pursued by the Furies of his own self-betrayal. If he could still speak with firmness, it was a false firmness—a poor rag clutched around a shivering soul.

"And just as I did, Kirk, you'll end up ordering your own people 'ashore'."

Misery loves company, Kirk thought. McCoy had cried out, "You must know that's impossible! Starfleet regulations—"

Claudius completed the sentence. "—are designed to circumvent any such order. There may be over four hundred people on your ship, Captain, but they'll come down if it's handled properly… a few at a time." The plump little man smiled. "You forget I have a trained ship captain to tell me what is possible and what is not possible." He took a communicator from the pocket of his smart sports jacket. "Your communicator, Captain Kirk. Save us all a lot of unnecessary trouble and issue the appropriate orders."

Merik tried for a comradely tone. "They'll be arriving soon anyway, Jim. A recon party first. Then a rescue party, then a larger rescue party. I had less men but it adds up to the same in the end."

Kirk smiled at them. "You really believe I can be made to order my people down?"

"I believe this, Captain," Claudius said. "You'd do almost anything rather than have to watch your two friends here put slowly to death."

The soft little man was anything but soft. The plump body was built on bones of cold steel. Kirk felt the sweat breaking out on his

palms. Then he reached out and took the communicator.

"Jim!"

Kirk opened the communicator, ignoring McCoy's cry of protest. "Captain to bridge, come in…"

"Bridge, Scott here. Go ahead, sir."

Reaching down, Claudius pressed a button as Kirk spoke quickly into the communicator. "If you have a fix on us, Scotty—" He stopped. The door had opened. Guards' submachine guns were leveled at him, at Spock, at McCoy.

"Stand by, Engineer…" Kirk closed the communicator.

"Wise of you, Captain," Claudius said. "No point in beaming up three bullet-ridden corpses."

"On the other hand my chief engineer is standing by for a message. If I bring down a hundred men armed with phasers…"

"You could probably defeat the combined armies of our entire empire." Claudius' lips moved in a smile that Kirk was beginning to dread. "At a cost, Captain—the violation of your oath regarding noninterference with, other societies." He addressed Spock. "I believe you all swear you'll die before you'll violate that directive. Am I right?"

"Quite correct," Spock said.

McCoy's tension exploded. "Spock, must you always be so blasted honest?"

Claudius returned to the workover on Kirk. "Why even bother to bring down armed men? I'm told your vessel can easily lay waste to this world's surface." He smiled once more. "Oh, but there's that prime directive in the way again, isn't there? Mustn't interfere." He pointed to the communicator. "Well, Captain, you've a message started. Your engineer is waiting. What are you going to do?"

This Roman in the sports jacket would have been a priceless asset to the Spanish Inquisition. It was small comfort to know at last what he was up against. Kirk opened the communicator. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Scotty…"

Claudius, at his shoulder, heard Scott say, "We were becoming concerned, Captain. You were a bit overdue."

"Order your officers to join us," Claudius said.

" 'Condition green'," Kirk said. "All is well. Captain out." He closed the communicator.

Claudius hurled his wine goblet across the room. He snatched the communicator and Merik shouted, "Jim, that was stupid!"

Claudius was fairly dancing with fury. "Guards, take them! Prepare them for the games!"

As the three were hustled past Merik, the ex-captain said, "This is no Academy training test, Kirk! *This is real! They're taking you out to die!*"

Miles above it all, an unhappy Scott was torn by indecision of his own. "Condition green" was a code term for trouble. But it also forbade the taking of any action to relieve it. Kirk seldom signaled trouble. Now that he had signaled it, it would be bad trouble.

Scott left the command chair to go to Uhura. "Lieutenant, are you *certain* there's no contact?"

"Nothing, Mr Scott. Except for their message you received."

"Mr Chekov?"

"Nothing, sir. Sensors lost them when they entered the city."

With action immobilized, fancied horrors began to parade themselves for the miserable Scott.

The arena was a TV studio sound stage. Somebody had done a good job on his Roman history. The stage was galleried, its tiers of rounded stone benches rising in genuine Colosseum style. But the cameras were focused on the sand-sprinkled central space below where combat was won or lost. At the cameraman's "ready" signal, an announcer assumed the amiable smile that was the twentieth-century's stock-in-trade of announcers the world over.

Canned music blared; and to a red light's flash, the announcer went on the air.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Live from City Arena tonight and in living color, we bring you 'Name the Winner!' Brought to you by your Jupiter Eight dealers from coast to coast. In a moment, tonight's first heat…"

The light read: OFF THE AIR—and the announcer's big smile vanished as though it had never been. There was an Observers' Booth, hung with velvet, behind him. Claudius and Merik were the first to enter it. Armed guards with Kirk, his arms bound behind his back, followed them. The announcer turned. "We're in a taped commercial, Proconsul. Back on the air in forty seconds," he said.

The guards shoved Kirk into a chair, their guns aimed at his back. Merik, his self-assurance visibly less, threw him a concerned glance. But Claudius, fully at home here, merely turned to make sure that Kirk had noted the entrance into the combat space.

Spock and McCoy were standing in it.

Clad in gladiator gear, they'd been given Roman shields and swords. Spock held his weapon with the born athlete's confidence; but McCoy was fingering his awkwardly. Looking up, they both caught sight of Kirk—and he knew that their anxiety for him matched his anxiety for them. But there wasn't time even for anxiety. Horror filled Kirk. To their rear was a man with a rawhide whip: an older man, the Master of the Games, thickly-muscled, his hard face that of a veteran who knew the gladiator racket from the bottom up.

The announcer said, "Stand by… ten seconds!"

The older man signed to the pair's guard escort. Pointed swords were pressed against their backs. "If they refuse to move on out, skewer them," the hardbitten veteran told the guards.

"Condition green." Maybe it had been a mistake to prohibit action by the *Enterprise*. Kirk hadn't visualized anything like this. He moved in his bonds, straining against them as the announcer got his on the air light.

"And first tonight, a surprise 'extra'! In the far corner, a couple of aggressive barbarians with strange ways I'm sure will be full of surprises. Facing them, your favorites and mine from previous matches—Maximus Achilles and our noted Flavius!"

Flavius, the experienced gladiator. And the other one, just as big, just as competent-looking. Kirk could estimate their familiarity with the work at hand by the way they were moving out into the arena. Equally efficient, the sports announcer was milking his last ounce of suspense from the spectacle.

"Victory—or death? And for which of them? You know as much as I do at this moment. Ladies and gentlemen, this is *your* program! You '*Name the Winner'!*"

To the beat of more canned music, the two big gladiators saluted the Proconsul with lifted swords. Then they stepped forward toward Spock and McCoy.

Intuition had placed Spock into a nearly correct defensive stance. McCoy lacked it. Despite his Starship combat training, he wasn't the athletic match of either Spock or the tested fighters who were approaching them.

Nearing them, Flavius said quietly, "Why you? I don't mind killing humans but—"

A flourish of trumpets drowned his words. Maximus, eyeing Spock, chose him for his opponent. The Vulcan pivoted, evading the first sword slash. McCoy found himself confronting Flavius, both of them hesitant, unsure. The whip cracked. "Begin!"

Always reluctant to take a life, Spock was merely defending himself. Maximus bored in on him. Flavius took a half-hearted slash at McCoy and missed. Instinctively, the *Enterprise* man lifted his weapon—and the contest was underway.

Again, Claudius turned to check on Kirk's reactions. They were extremely satisfactory. The Starship Captain had paled and was sitting unnaturally still, his forehead beaded with sweat. The edgy Merik didn't turn; but the back of his neck was red with shamed blood.

The announcer was saying, "Flavius is getting off to a slow start, but he's never disappointed us for very—*there's a close one! The barbarian with the pointed ears is in trouble!*"

Spock's recoil from offensive action had backed him into a corner, and the huge Maximus was closing in to finish him off.

"Please…" Spock said. "I tell you I am well able to defeat you."

"Fight, Barbarian!"

Once more Spock barely avoided a sword slash. He was thrown off balance and Maximus raised his weapon to end the match. Watching, Kirk tried to get to his feet. Slammed back by a guard, he felt the cold muzzle of a submachine gun pushed against his neck. Merik leaned back, his voice lowered. "Most of my men went the same way. I'd hoped I'd feel it less with yours…"

Pure defense had its disadvantages. In the arena, Spock had dodged another slash only to expose himself to another one. "I beg you… I don't want to…" He ducked again. "… injure you…"

The cords binding Kirk's arms were slippery with sweat. Every muscle in his body revolted against his helplessness. They were his for action—action he'd taken time and again when Spock needed action. His face reflected his agony. Claudius, turning once more, found it more interesting than his games.

Their Master was displeased. "*Fight, you two!*" He crashed his whip hard across Flavius' naked back. The gladiator's sword came up. Then it dropped, as experience warned him that the old survivor of hundreds of bloody bouts was far too canny to ever blunder into weapon reach.

"You bring this network's ratings down, Flavius—and we'll do a 'special' on you…"

The old-timer's threat worked. Flavius aimed a more skillful blow at McCoy, the massive power of his right arm evident even at half-strength. McCoy staggered back.

"Merik…"Kirk said.

Claudius spoke. "Question, Captain?"

"The rules?" Kirk said. "If Spock should finish his man first…"

Claudius shook his head. "He can't help his friend. We believe that men should fight their own battles." He smiled his dreadful soft smile again. "Ready to order your crew down? Only the weak will die. My word as a Roman, Captain."

"No," Kirk said.

His tension was beginning to affect Merik. The one-time Space Academy cadet checked Claudius; and leaning back to Kirk said very quietly, "Maybe… you understand now why I gave in, Jim. Romans were always the strongest… two thousand years practice enslaving people, using them, killing them…"

Claudius had overheard. Without turning, he said, "Quite true, Captain Kirk." He pointed to the arena. "The games have always strengthened us. Death becomes familiar. We don't fear it as you do. Admit it… you find these games frightening, repellent…"

"Frightening." Should he say, "Your games don't frighten me. The spirit behind them does." The little man wanted fear. Kirk wasn't giving him any. "In some parts of the galaxy," he said, "I've seen forms of entertainment that make this look like a folkdance."

It hit home. For the first time, Claudius eyed him with uncertainty.

The whip had again cracked across Flavius' back. Boos came from the guards and galleries. Irritated, the huge gladiator snarled, "At least defend yourself!"

McCoy, angered, too, cried, "I am defending myself!"

"Not like that, you fool! Hold your weapon higher! *Now, swing at me!*"

McCoy swung, almost losing his balance. Flavius diverted the blow with an easy wrist movement. McCoy's anger mounted with his realization of his own incompetence. And Flavius, smarting under the lashings, the continuing jeers, was struggling with a growing rage of his own.

The wet cords that held Kirk should have been easier to slip out of. His hands were wrenching at them when he saw that Claudius was watching him. He stopped struggling; and Claudius said, "Those are your men dying down there, Captain, not strangers."

Kirk's eyes met his. "I've had to select men to die before, Proconsul, so that more could be saved."

"You're a clever liar." There was a pause before the little Twentieth-century Roman gestured to the man beside him. "He was a space captain, too. I've examined him thoroughly. Your species has no strength."

Kirk didn't answer. Merik shifted uneasily; and Claudius, noticing his move, snapped, "Well, what is it? *Out with it!*"

"He… Jim… Kirk commands not just a space ship, Proconsul, but a Starship." Merik flushed under Claudius' glare. "A special kind of vessel… and crew. I tried for such a command but…" His words trailed off into silence.

Claudius looked down at Spock and McCoy. "I see no evidence of superiority. They fight no better than your men, Merikus. Perhaps not as well."

And indeed the galleries' hissing was growing in volume. "*Stop running!*" Maximus yelled at Spock. "*Fight!*"

He stabbed at him; and Spock, deftly turning the blow, threw a quick look toward McCoy. Then he maneuvered his fight closer to McCoy and Flavius.

"Do you need help, Doctor?"

Frustrated and furious, McCoy shouted, "Whatever gave you that idea?" He made another swing at Flavius; and Maximus, maddened by Spock's elusiveness, bellowed, "*Fight*, you pointed-eared freak!"

"You tell him, Buster!" McCoy told Maximus. He tried for a better grip on his sword. "*Of course*, I need help! Of all…" Enraged at Spock, McCoy went into a flurry of wild lunges at Flavius, unaware that he was rousing a blood-madness that would turn his antagonist into a very formidable enemy. "? the illogical, completely ridiculous questions I ever heard," he panted. He swung again.

Flavius growled deep in his throat. He charged with a series of murderous slashes that snapped McCoy back into reality—the fact that he'd provoked a savagery which could put an end to his life in a matter of seconds.

Spock recognized his sudden peril. He went into his first attack, amazing the towering Maximus by his speed and efficiency. He streaked in on the gladiator, closer and closer; but McCoy was already beaten down to the sand, his shield torn from his grasp. He'd learned enough to parry the next blow. Then his sword was wrenched from his hand.

Kirk saw how defenseless he was. He pulled himself away from the guns behind him and got to his feet, surging against his bonds. They held: and the guards, slamming him back into his seat, immobilized him,

Spock, downing his man with a "space karate" chop, was racing across the arena. He reached Flavius; and spinning him around,

dropped him with his Vulcan neck pinch. The arena went into bedlam. The Master of the Games rushed to the *Enterprise* men to cries of "Foul!" from the galleries. His guards, running after him, grabbed both Spock and McCoy and pinioned their arms behind their backs.

Kirk, Claudius and Merik were all on their feet.

The shocked announcer whirled to Claudius. "A clear foul, Proconsul! Your decision?"

Down in the arena, swords were pointed, pressing, against the captives' necks. The Master of the Games looked up to the Observers' Booth for the Proconsul's word, ignoring the galleries' clamor for immediate death. Claudius spoke to Merik.

"Your opinion, Merikus? After all they're like yourself."

Whatever his opinion was, Merik considered it safer to keep it to himself. "It… it's *your* decision, Proconsul."

Claudius turned. "And your opinion, Captain Kirk?" He didn't wait to hear it. "Kill them now—and you'll gladly accept whatever happens to you. I wouldn't relish that—but you almost tricked me into depriving myself of real pleasure." He moved to the edge of the booth. "Master of the Games, take them back to their cage!"

He turned again to face Kirk. "It won't be easy for them, Captain. And especially not for you!" He spoke to Kirk's guards. "Bring him to my quarters. *Now!*"

He left the booth. And the guards hustled Kirk along after him.

After the raw violence of the arena, the effete luxury of Claudius' suite sickened Kirk. It was the triumph of an art connoisseur. The room was tapestried; and an alcove held a wide bed embroidered in gold. In a large wall niche, a marble statue of Minerva, Roman goddess of wisdom, presided over those self-indulgences that were the delectation of the soft man of steel.

The guards marched Kirk into the room and left him. There was no one in sight. But Claudius had promised that something particularly unpleasant was going to happen to him here. Wary, uncertain, Kirk searched the room with his eyes. A heavy Etruscan jar stood on a pedestal. Kirk seized it, hefting it for weight and balance. If he was going to die, he wasn't going to do it without a fight…

"I was told…"

It was a feminine voice. Drusilla moved out from the bed alcove's hangings, hesitating at the sight of Kirk with his lifted weapon. This time the gown she wore was pure white. Her straight blond hair fell below her waist. And the white of her gown enhanced the creamy tone of her skin.

"I was told," she said, "to wait for you." She went to a table. "And to provide wine, food, whatever you wish. I am the Proconsul's slave, although for this evening…" She was pouring wine, clearly expecting him to come to the table. He didn't move. Inevitably what occurred in this room was bound to lead to treachery, torture and in the end, to certain death.

She turned, surprised by his stillness. "I was told that for this evening, I am your slave. Then command me."

"No," Kirk said. "You can tell the Proconsul it won't work."

She frowned, puzzled. "What will not work?"

"Whatever he has in mind. Whatever trickery or…"

She left the table to lay a hand on his arm. This master of hers, though temporary, obviously required soothing. Kirk removed the hand. Then he shouted, "*Do you hear me, Proconsul?* Whatever you have in mind, I'm riot cooperating! I may have to die—but I won't give you entertainment out of it!"

Drusilla came closer to him but, brushing her roughly aside, he strode past her to the door. He opened it, looking into the corridor, sure he'd find a spy lurking in it. It was empty. He and the slave girl seemed to be totally alone.

She divined his thought. "Except for the guards at the street entrances, we are alone here," she said. "Please believe me. I have never lied to one who owns me."

But Kirk's suspicion wasn't laid. This *had* to be a grotesque trick of some new variety… and yet the girl's every word and gesture spoke of sincerity. She seemed honestly puzzled by his behavior—and in her extremely feminine way, a little disappointed by it, too.

He began to wish he could relax. His friends' lives had been spared—but to what purpose? What was going on in that "cage" where they'd been confined?

Going on in the cage was determined escape effort. Its door was barred; and Spock, rallying every ounce of his strength, was trying to pull it loose by the very fury of the need to do so. McCoy, standing behind him, saw that neither bars nor door had given a half-inch.

"Angry, Spock? Or frustrated, perhaps?"

"Such emotion is quite foreign to me, Doctor. I was merely testing the strength of the door."

McCoy nodded. "For the fifteenth time."

Spock came close to showing irritation. Disdaining to answer, he turned from the door, again inspecting the cell for some possible weapon or escape route. Watching him, McCoy's eyes softened. After a space, he said gently, "Spock…"

Spock turned, expecting a jibe for what was clearly his frantic anxiety for the safety of his captain. And though McCoy shared it, he had another matter on his mind at the moment.

"Spock, uh… we've had our disagreements…" Because he was leveling, he was deeply embarrassed. "? or maybe they're jokes. As Jim says, we're often not sure ourselves. But… er… what I mean to say is…" He hesitated again. "Well, what I mean is—"

"Doctor," Spock said, "I'm seeking a weapon or an escape method. Please be brief."

"I'm… trying to say you saved my life in the arena."

Spock nodded. "Quite true."

That fact mutually acknowledged, he resumed his examination of every possibility of their cell.

McCoy blew up. "*I was trying to thank you, you—you pointed-eared hobgoblin!*"

"Ah, yes," Spock said. "Humans do suffer from an emotional need to show gratitude." He gave a small nod. " 'You're welcome' is, I believe, the correct response." He moved off, still searching. "However, Doctor, you should remember that I am motivated solely by logic. The loss of our ship's surgeon, whatever I may think of his relative skill, is a loss to the efficiency of our vessel and therefore to—"

McCoy interrupted. "Do you know why you're not afraid of dying, Spock? *You're more afraid of living*. Every day you stay alive is one more day you might slip—and let your human half peek out." He lessened the distance between them. "That's it, isn't it? *Insecurity!* You wouldn't know what to do with a genuine, warm, decent feeling!"

Spock wheeled—and this time McCoy caught him at it. There was an instant when he actually saw Spock composing his face into Vulcan impassivity. Then the instant was gone—and Spock raised an eyebrow.

"Really, Doctor?" he said.

McCoy thought, “I am very fond of this man.” What he said was, “I know. I’m worried about Jim, too, Spock.”

For the moment, anyway, their captain was safe. He was also hungry. And seated beside Drusilla on a couch, he was making excellent inroads on the tray of food she insisted on holding for him. It was a long time since he’s tasted roast pheasant. And the wine was good wine. After all, food was food and wine was wine, unlikely to be up to tricks. As to the girl… Hunger and thirst appeased, he took his first good look at her.

“You’ve noticed me at last,” she said. “I was becoming concerned. I am ordered to please you.”

Kirk sipped more wine. “Good,” he said. Then he pointed to the roast pheasant’s remains. “Excellent. And you?”

“Superb, I’m told,” she said, straight-faced. “But then, men lie, don’t they?”

Kirk eyed her. Then he leaned back against the couch. “I’ve seen strange worlds, strange customs,” he told her. “Perhaps here this is considered torture.”

She moved close to him, placing the tray on the table. “Torture? I do not understand. I have no wish to see you tortured in any way.” She kissed him. “At the first sign of pain, you will tell me?”

“You’ll be the first to know,” he said. He took her in his arms and returned the kiss with interest.

Up on the *Enterprise*, Scott was tiring of misery. He was rapidly transforming it into the kind of productive anger that opens up new vistas for action.

“How long since we’ve heard?” he asked Uhura.

“Nine hours, forty-one seconds, sir.” She indicated the viewing screen. “It’s almost dark there. We’ll see the city lights coming on soon.”

“Mr Chekov, take over the scanners. Lieutenant Uhura, give him a hand.” He returned to the command chair, still hesitating. On the other hand, no order had said he couldn’t frighten whoever it was down there who was causing bad trouble for his captain and the landing parry. It might do no good. Yet it just could be salutary to suggest what a Starship could really do if it got serious.

He made up his mind. “Lieutenant Uhura, pinpoint the city’s power source locations.” He paused before he added, “Mr Chekov, type the power, the load factors—and how much our beams must pull to overload them.”

“Captain….”

Sprawled in sleep on the alcove’s bed, Kirk came instantly awake at the sound of Claudius’ voice. He had started to roll, protecting himself when he saw that the little man was alone, just standing there, a newly benign look on his face.

“You’ve had a harrowing time on our planet,” he said. “I’m not surprised you slept through the afternoon.” He left the alcove to go to a table. “Sorry I was detained. Shall we have our talk now?”

He was pouring wine. Kirk followed him, distrust rising again at sight of the armed guard posted just outside the door. Offered wine, he shook his head. Claudius went on. “Oh, one of the communicators we took from you is missing. Was it my pretty Drusilla by any chance?”

Kirk didn’t answer. Merik had entered the room. Claudius, pointing to Kirk, said, “See if he has the communicator.”

Still silent, Kirk permitted the search, “Not that I would have punished her badly. I would have blamed you, Merik,” Claudius said. He lifted his goblet. “You’re a Roman, Kirk—or should have been. It’s not on his person?”

“No, Proconsul.” Merik addressed Kirk. “He said a ‘Roman.’ You’ve just received as great a compliment, Jim—”

Claudius interrupted. “Care for food, Captain Kirk?”

Kirk saw that Merik, pointedly uninvited to sit, was shifting uncomfortably. “Thank you, I’ve eaten,” he said.

“I trust there was nothing you required that you didn’t receive,” Claudius said.

“Nothing. Except… perhaps an explanation.”

“I’m sure our world seems as strange to you as yours would seem to me.” He looked up. “Since you are a man, I owe you this immediately. You must die in a few hours.”

He swallowed. “And also because you are a man…” He became conscious of Merik’s presence and a flicker of something like contempt passed across his face. “You may leave us, Merik. The thoughts of one man shared with another cannot interest you.”

Merik almost responded to the open insult. Then he decided that for him silence was golden. He left the room; and Claudius, resuming, said to Kirk, "And since you are a man, Captain Kirk, I gave you some last hours as a man. Do you understand?"

A small smile on his lips, Kirk said, "Let's say… I appreciated it."

"Unfortunately, your defiances in the arena were seen by the television audience. We must demonstrate that defiance is wrong."

"Of course," Kirk said.

"But because I have learned to respect you, I promise you will die quickly and easily."

"Naturally, I prefer that. And my friends?"

"Of course, you'd ask that. And, of course, when their time comes, the same." Summoning guards, he gestured to Kirk. "Take him to the arena." A comforting afterthought occurred to him. "We've preempted fifteen minutes on the early show for you," he told Kirk. "We will have a good audience, full color. You may not understand the honor, since you are centuries beyond anything as crude as television."

"I recall it was similar," Kirk said.

They hadn't bound his hands. He needed them to hold his sword and shield. From the arena's entrance, where Spock and McCoy had waited, he would see Claudius moving into the Observers' Booth above him. Guards, supervised by the Master of the Games, pushed him past a big man in gladiator dress. He recognized Flavius. The two were exchanging glances when Merik's voice, speaking to one of the guards, said, "I'll speak privately with the prisoner."

The Master of the Games was annoyed. "Impossible," he said shortly.

"I am still First Citizen. You will obey me!"

The announcer spoke. "Stand by… ten seconds."

The Master of the Games, completely ignoring Merik, moved Kirk out into the arena's center. Desperate, the man who'd betrayed himself, shouted, "Too late to help you, Jim! I'll do what I can for your friends!"

The announcer, on signal, was speaking into his microphone. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Before the first heat tonight, a simple execution. But keep your dial turned to this channel—there's lots of excitement to follow…"

Claudius leaned over the booth's edge. "Master of the Games, make it quick! A single thrust!"

The veteran drew his sword. "Don't move," he told Kirk. "You'll only die harder."

As he lifted his weapon to strike, there was a wild cry. "*Murderers!*"

Flavius had raced into the arena, sword raised high. The startled Master of the Games wheeled to meet the onslaught. Guards were running to block the gladiator's rush; and Kirk, moving fast to help him, had almost reached him when every light in the place went out, plunging it into near darkness. Kirk hesitated for a split second. Then he used the dimness to fell a guard with a "space karate" blow. Another lunged for him. A smash with a sword butt sent him sprawling. There was a burst of submachine gunfire. Kirk, close to Flavius now, cried, "The cells! Which way?"

"The barred doors across…"

Flavius was cut down by another splatter of bullets. Kirk, realizing his danger, dodged a sword slash—and seizing the guard, spun him around to face the source of the gunfire. The man stumbled forward into the guard with the gun. He was thrown off balance—and Kirk, grabbing the gun, clubbed himself free. The lights came back as he reached the barred doors at the other side of the arena.

He was seen. Guards shouted. A submachine gun blast struck near him. He turned, firing a burst himself. It silenced the gunner. Kirk fired again at the heavy lock on the barred doors.

Their cell was at the middle of a corridor. "Look out!" Kirk yelled to them. His gun spit bullets at the cell's lock.

Spock kicked the door open and McCoy cried, "Jim! Are you all right?"

"What did they do to you, Captain?"

"They threw me—a few curves, Spock. Perhaps it's better if I don't talk about it now…"

He'd heard the sounds of pursuit. Guards had followed him, running. A javelin hurtled past them. Kirk aimed the gun. The men halted but one in the rear was raising the muzzle of his…

"Hold!"

It was Claudius. Guards ranged behind him; he stood at the other end of the corridor. In both directions escape was cut off.

"We're in each other's line of fire." Claudius spoke to the guards. "Swords only."

Both groups of guards, swords high, were moving in.

"But I can use my gun," Kirk said. "And in either direction, Claudius."

As he eyed the little Proconsul, he saw that Merik had joined him. Claudius moved away from him. "I pity you, 'Captain' Merik," he said. "But watch. At least *see* how men die."

A guard with a javelin raised his arm. Kirk whirled with the gun. It gave a click on an empty cylinder. The guards charged. Kirk downed the first with his gunstock.

Spock reached for his dropped sword and McCoy picked up the javelin beside him.

Merik came to a decision. Death was nearing the *Enterprise* men. They were fighting now back to back. Merik pulled the missing communicator from his pocket, clicking it open. "Starship, lock in on this place: three to…"

With a shocked look on his face, he staggered. Claudius withdrew the sword he'd driven into him. Merik glanced at his seducer; and choking on blood, whispered into the communicator, "Three to beam-up… emergency…"

As he fell, he threw the communicator to Kirk over the heads of the guards. The dead Bob Merrick of the Space Academy had finally made peace with himself. Already, before Claudius' astounded eyes, Kirk, Spock and McCoy were dematerializing into dazzle. Then even its sparkles were gone.

Kirk was dictating into his Captain's Log.

"Note commendation to Engineering Officer Scott for his performance in commanding this vessel during my absence. Despite enormous temptation and strong personal feelings, he obeyed the Prime Directive. His temporary 'blackout' of the city below resulted in no interference with its society and yet saved the lives of myself and the landing party. We are prepared to leave orbit shortly."

He punched his "off" button. Beside him, Scott, his face red with embarrassed pleasure, said, "Thank you, Captain. I'll see to the engines."

As he entered the bridge elevator, Spock and McCoy stepped out of it.

McCoy, approaching the command chair, said, "I just saw on your report that Flavius was killed. I'm sorry. I liked that huge sun-

worshiper."

Spock spoke earnestly. "I wish we could have examined that belief of his more closely, Captain. It does seem illogical that sun-worshipers could evolve a philosophy of total brotherhood. Worship of the sun is almost always a primitive superstition-religion…"

Uhura had overheard. She turned from her console. "I'm afraid you have it wrong, Mr Spock. All of you…"

Three pairs of eyes were on her. She went on. "I've been monitoring old-style radio waves and heard talk about this brotherhood religion. Don't you understand? Not the sun in the sky… the *Son—the Son of God!*"

McCoy protested. "But when we mentioned stars, Septimus said they worshiped the sun up there."

But Kirk's face was thoughtful. "In most of our own religions, don't people tend to look upward when speaking of the Deity?" He paused. "Caesar and Christ… they *did* have both. And the word is spreading only now down there."

"A philosophy of total love, total brotherhood," McCoy said.

Spock nodded. "It will replace their Imperial Rome. And it will happen during their Twentieth century."

Remembering the arena's ferocity, Kirk said, "It would be something to watch, to be part of."

"How stupid of me not to have comprehended!" Spock exclaimed.

McCoy looked at him. "I tend to go along with that, Mr Spock."

"Doctor… the next time I have an opportunity to save your life __"

"—you'll do the logical thing, save me." McCoy smiled. "Comforting to know that, Spock."

Something good had happened between the two, Kirk thought. He was glad. Both men were dear to him. It was high time they admitted how dear they were to each other. Though he knew how little their sparring meant, it was a waste of time that could be better spent. On the other hand, who knew? There were many ways of revealing affection.

He turned to Chekov. "Take us out of orbit, Mr Chekov. Ahead, warp factor one."

"Aye, sir. Ahead, warp factor one."

Kirk looked at the viewing screen. The Earth-like planet that had confused itself with the Roman Empire was a diminishing pinpoint

of light. Then it was gone.

JOURNEY TO BABEL

(D. C. Fontana)

The honor guard of eight security men was lined up before the airlock, four men to a side, with Kirk, Spock and McCoy, all three in formal dress blue uniforms, at the end of this human tube. McCoy tugged at his collar, which he had previously described as "like having my neck in a sling." He asked Spock, "How does that Vulcan salute go?"

Spock demonstrated. The gesture was complex and McCoy's attempt to copy it was not very convincing.

The surgeon shook his head. "That hurts worse than the uniform."

The uniforms were the least of their discomforts, Kirk thought a little grimly. They'd soon be out of those, after the formal reception tonight, and the Vulcans were the last group of delegates the *Enterprise* had to pick up. Then would come the trip to the neutral planetoid code-named "Babel"—a two-week journey with a hundred and fourteen Federation delegates aboard, thirty-two of them ambassadors, half of them mad at the other half, and the whole lot touchier than a raw anti-matter pile over the Coridian question. Now *that* was going to be uncomfortable.

The airlock opened, and the Vulcan Ambassador, Sarek, stepped through. Because of Vulcan longevity, it would have been impossible to guess his age—he looked to be no more than in his late forties—but Kirk knew it to be in fact a hundred and two, which was middle age by Vulcan standards. He was followed, several paces behind, by a woman wearing a traveling outfit with a colorful hooded cloak; she in turn was followed by two Vulcan aides.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy stood at attention as the party walked past the honor guard to the Captain. Spock stepped formally in front of Sarek and gave the complex salute.

"Vulcan honors us with your presence," he said. "We come to serve."

Sarek pointedly ignored him and saluted Kirk instead. When he spoke, his voice was almost without inflection.

"Captain, your service honors us."

"Thank you, Ambassador," Kirk said with a slight bow. "Captain James Kirk. My First Officer, Commander Spock. Dr McCoy, Chief Medical Officer."

Sarek nodded briefly in turn and indicated the rest of his party. "My aides." He held up his hand, first and second fingers extended. The woman stepped forward and touched her first and second fingers to his. "And Amanda, she who is my wife."

"Captain Kirk," the woman said.

"My pleasure, madam. Ambassador, as soon as you're settled, I'll arrange a tour of the ship. My First Officer will conduct you."

I prefer another guide, Captain," Sarek said.

He was absolutely expressionless, and so was Spock. This snub was just as baffling and even more pointed than before, but it would not be a good idea to offend a ranking ambassador.

"Of course—if you wish. Mr Spock, we have two hours until we leave orbit. Would you like to beam down and visit your parents?"

There was a slight but noticeable silence. Then Spock said, "Captain—Ambassador Sarek and his wife *are* my parents."

Was I just telling myself, Kirk thought glumly after the first shock, that this trip was going to be just "uncomfortable"?

Upon reflection, Kirk gave himself the job of guiding the tour. He found Spock's mother especially interesting—remarkable, even—though she was hard to study because she habitually walked behind and to the side of any man, her husband most notably. This was a Vulcan ritual to which she had adapted, for Amanda was an Earthwoman; almost everyone in the crew knew that much about Spock.

Though in her late fifties, she was still straight, slim and resilient. She had married a Vulcan and come to live on his world where her human-woman emotions had no place. Kirk strongly suspected that she had not lost any of her human humor and warmth, but that it was buried inside, in deference to her husband's customs and society.

He led them into the Engineering Room. Spock, by now in regular uniform, was working at the computer banks behind the grilled partition.

"This is the engineering section," Kirk told his guests. "There are emergency backup systems for the main controls. We also have a number of control computers here."

Amanda was still behind them and, without Sarek appearing to notice, she moved over to Spock. Out of the corner of his eye, Kirk saw each of them cross hands and touch them, palms out, in a ritual embrace. Then they began to murmur. Spock's face was expressionless, as usual. Once, Amanda shook her head ruefully.

Kirk continued his lecture, hoping to avoid trouble, but Sarek's eyes were as alert as his own. "My wife, attend," the Ambassador said. He held up his first and second fingers. Without a word, Amanda nodded to Spock to excuse herself and obediently moved to Sarek, joining her fingers with his, though Kirk guessed that she was really not much interested in the console and its instruments.

Spock, gathering up a handful of tapes, rose and headed for the door. Kirk had a sudden idea.

"Mr Spock—a moment, please."

The First Officer turned reluctantly. "Yes, Captain?"

"Ambassador, I'm not competent to explain our computer setup. Mr Spock, will you do so, please?"

"I gave Spock his first instruction in computers," Sarek said woodenly. "He chose to devote his knowledge to Starfleet rather than the Vulcan Science Academy."

That tore it. In trying to be helpful, Kirk had unwittingly put his foot right into the heart of the family quarrel. Apologetically, he nodded dismissal to Spock, and turned to Sarek.

"I'm sorry, Ambassador. I didn't mean to offend you in…"

"Offense is a human emotion, Captain. For other reasons, I am returning to my quarters. Continue, my wife."

Amanda bowed her head in characteristic acceptance, and Sarek left. Kirk, puzzled and confused as never before by his First Officer and his relatives, turned to her, shaking his head.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Mrs Sarek."

"Amanda," she said quickly. "I'm afraid you couldn't pronounce the Vulcan family name."

"Can you?"

A smile fluttered on her lips, then vanished as habit overtook her. "After a fashion, and after many years of practice… Shall we continue the tour? My husband did request it."

"It sounded more like a command."

"Of course. He's a Vulcan. I'm his wife."

"Spock is his son."

Amanda glanced at him sharply, as though surprised, but recovered quickly. "You don't understand the Vulcan way, Captain. It's logical. It's a better way than ours—but its not easy; It has kept Spock and Sarek from speaking as father and son for eighteen years."

"Spock is my best officer," Kirk said. "And my best friend."

"I'm glad he has such a friend. It hasn't been easy for Spock—neither Vulcan nor human; at home nowhere, except Starfleet."

"I gather Spock disagreed with his father over his choice of a career."

"My husband has nothing against Starfleet. But Vulcans believe peace should not depend on force. Sarek wanted Spock to follow his teaching as Sarek followed the teaching of *his* father."

"And they're both stubborn."

Amanda smiled. "Also a human trait, Captain."

Abruptly, Uhura's voice interrupted from a console speaker. "Bridge to Captain Kirk."

Kirk snapped a toggle. "Kirk here."

"Captain, I've picked up some sort of signal; just a few symbols, nothing intelligible."

"Source?"

"That's what bothers me, sir. Impossible to locate. There wasn't enough of it. Sensors show nothing in the area. But it was a strong signal, as though it was very close."

"Go to alert status four. Begin long-range scanning. Kirk out." Kirk frowned thoughtfully and flicked off the switch. "Madame—Amanda—I'll have to ask you to excuse me. I shall hope to see you again at the reception this evening."

"Certainly, Captain. Both Vulcans and humans know what duty is."

The reception was already going full blast when Kirk arrived. Amid a murmur of conversation, delegates circulated, or sampled the table of exotic drinks, *hors d'oeuvre.* There was a fantastic array of them from many cultures.

Over it all was a fault aura of edgy politeness verging on hostility. The Interplanetary Conference had been called to consider the petition of the Coridian planets to be admitted to the

Federation. The Coridian system had already been claimed by some of the races who now had delegates aboard the *Enterprise,* races who therefore had strong personal reasons for keeping Coridan *out* of the Federation. Keeping open warfare from breaking out among the delegates before the Conference even began was going to be a tough problem; many of them were not even trained diplomats, but minor officials who had been handed a hot potato by bosses who did not want to be saddled with the responsibility for whatever happened on Babel.

Kirk spotted Spock and McCoy in a group which included a Tellarite named Gav, two Andorians called Shras and Thelev, and Sarek and Amanda. Well, at least Spock was—er—associating with his family, however distantly.

As Kirk joined the group, McCoy was saying, "Mr Ambassador, I understood that you had retired from public service before this conference was called. Forgive my curiosity, but, as a doctor, I'm interested in Vulcan physiology. Isn't it unusual for a Vulcan to retire at your age? You're only a hundred or so."

As was characteristic of Andorians because of their sensitive antennae, Shras was listening with his head down and slightly tilted, while Gav, sipping a snifter of brandy, was staring directly into Sarek's face. For an Earthman unaccustomed to either race, it would have been hard to say which of them, if either, was being rude.

Sarek said, "One hundred and two point four three seven, measured in your years. I had other—concerns."

Gav put his snifter down and leaned still farther forward. When he spoke, his voice was rough, grating and clumsy; English was very difficult for all his people, if he spoke it better than most. "Sarek of Vulcan, do you vote to admit Coridan to the Federation?"

"The vote will not be taken here, Ambassador Gav. My government's instructions will be heard in the Council Chamber on Babel."

"No—*you.* How do *you* vote, Sarek of Vulcan?"

Shras lifted his head. "Why must you know, Tellarite?" His voice was whispery, almost silken.

"In Council, his vote carries others," Gav said, stabbing a finger toward Sarek. "I will know where he stands, and why."

"Tellarites do not argue for reasons," Sarek said. "They simply argue."

"That is a…"

"Gentlemen," Kirk interrupted firmly. "As Ambassador Sarek pointed out, this is not the Council Chamber on Babel. I'm aware the admission of Coridan is a highly debatable issue, but you can't solve it here."

For a moment the three Ambassadors stared defensively at each other. Then Sarek nodded to Kirk. "You are correct, Captain. Quite logical."

"Apologies, Captain," Shras whispered.

Gav remained rigid for a moment, then nodded and said in an angry voice, "You will excuse me," and left the group.

"You have met Gav before, Ambassador," Shras said softly to Sarek.

"We debated at my last Council session."

"Ambassador Gav lost," Amanda added with a straight face. If Shras was amused, his face was incapable of showing it. He nodded solemnly and moved off.

"Spock, I've always suspected you were more human," McCoy said, in an obvious attempt to lighten the atmosphere. "Mrs Sarek, I know about the rigorous training of Vulcan boys, but didn't he ever run and play like human youngsters? Even in secret?"

"Well," said Amanda, "he did have a sehlat he was very fond of."

"Sehlat?"

"It's rather like a fat teddy bear."

McCoy's eyes went wide. "A teddy bear?" Several other crew personnel had overheard this and there was a general snicker. Quickly, Sarek turned to his wife and took her arm firmly.

"Excuse us, Doctor," he said. "It has been a long day for my wife." He propelled her toward the door amid a barrage of "good nights."

McCoy turned back to Spock, who did not appear the least bit discomforted. "A teddy bear!"

"Not precisely, Doctor," Spock said. "On Vulcan, the 'teddy bears' are alive and have six-inch fangs."

McCoy, no Vulcan, was obviously rocked. He was bailed out by a nearby wall communicator, which said in Chekov's voice, "Bridge to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here."

"Captain, sensors are registering an unidentified vessel pacing us."

"On my way. Duty personnel on yellow alert. Passengers are not to be alarmed… Mr Spock!"

The intruder turned out to be a small ship, about the size of a scout, of no known configuration, and unauthorized in this quadrant. It had been paralleling the course of the *Enterprise* for five minutes, outside phaser range and indeed at the extreme limit of the starship's sensors, and would not answer hails on any frequency or in any language. An attempt to intercept showed the intruder not only more maneuverable than the *Enterprise,* but faster, by a nearly incredible two warps. Kirk ordered full analysis of all sensor readings made during the brief approach, and went back to the reception, leaving Spock in command.

It seemed to be petering out. Gav was still there, sitting isolated, still working on the brandy. If he was trying to get drunk, he was due for a disappointment, Kirk knew; alcohol had no effect on Tellarites except to shorten their already short tempers. Shras and Thelev were also still present, heads down, plus a few other delegates.

Most interestingly, Sarek had returned, by himself. Now why? Had his intent been only to get Amanda off the scene before she could further embarrass their son? There could be no emotional motive behind such a move. What would the logical one be? That whether Sarek approved of Starfleet or not, Spock was an officer in it, and could not function properly if he did not command respect? It seemed as good a guess as any; but Kirk knew that his understanding of Vulcan psychology was, to say the least, insecure.

While he was ruminating, Sarek had gone to a drink dispenser, with the aid of which he seemed to have downed a pill of some kind, and Gav had risen and come up behind him. Sensing trouble, Kirk moved unobtrusively closer. Sure enough, Gav had brought up the Coridan question again.

Sarek was saying; "You seem unable to wait for the Council meeting, Ambassador. No matter. We favor admission."

"You favor? *Why?*"

"Under Federation law, Coridan can be protected—its wealth administered for the benefit of its people."

"It's well for you," Gav said. "Vulcan has no mining interest."

"The Coridians have a nearly unlimited wealth of dilithium crystals, but are underpopulated and unprotected. This invites illegal mining operations."

"Illegal! You accuse us…?"

"Of nothing," Sarek said. "But reports indicate your ships have been carrying Coridian dilithium crystals."

"You call us thieves?" Without an instant's warning, Gav leaped furiously forward, grasping for Sarek's throat.

Sarek blocked the Tellarite's hands and effortlessly slammed him away, against a table. As Gav started to lunge at Sarek again, Kirk caught him and forced him back. "Lies!" Gav shouted over his shoulder. "You slander my people!"

"*Gentlemen!*" Kirk said.

Gav stopped struggling and Kirk stepped back, glaring coldly at both Ambassadors. "Whatever arguments you have among yourselves are your business," Kirk said. "*My* business is running this ship—and as long as I command it, *there will be order.*"

"Of course, Captain," Sarek said.

"Understood," Gav said sullenly after a moment. "But Sarek, there will be payment for your slander."

"Threats are illogical," Sarek said. "And such 'payment' is usually expensive."

However, the fight seemed to be over—and the reception as well. Kirk went to his quarters, almost too tired to worry. It had been a day full of tensions, not one of which was yet resolved. Most of the ship was on night status now, and it was a weary pleasure to go through the silent, empty corridors.

But it was not over yet. In his quarters, he had just gotten out of the dress uniform with relief when his intercom said: "Security to Captain Kirk."

What now?"Kirk here."

"Lt. Josephs, sir. I'm on Deck 11, Section A-3. I just found one of the Tellarites, murdered and stuffed into the Jefferies tube. I think it's the Ambassador himself, sir."

So a part of his mission—to keep the peace on board—had failed already.

McCoy knelt in the corridor next to the Jefferies tube and probed Gav's body, using no instruments but his surgeon's fingers. Kirk and Spock watched; Lt. Josephs and two security guards waited for orders to remove the body. At last McCoy rose.

"How was he killed?" Kirk asked.

"His neck was broken. By an expert."

Spock glanced sharply at McCoy and then bent to examine the body himself. Kirk said, "Explain."

"From the location and nature of the break, I'd say the killer knew exactly where to apply pressure to snap the spine instantly. Not even a blow was used—no bruise."

"Who aboard would have that knowledge besides yourself?"

"Vulcans," Spock said, straightening again. "On Vulcan, the method is called *tal-shaya*—considered a merciful method of execution in ancient times."

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "a short time ago I broke up an argument between your father and Gav."

"Indeed, Captain? Interesting."

"Interesting? Spock, do you realize that makes your father the most likely suspect?"

"Vulcans do not approve of violence."

"Are you saying your father couldn't have done this?"

"No," Spock said. "But it would be illogical to kill without reason."

"But it he had such a reason?"

"If there were a reason," Spock said, "my father is quite capable of killing—logically and efficiently. He has the skill, and is still only in middle age."

Kirk stared at his First Officer for a moment, appalled. Then he said, "Come with me. You too, Bones."

He led the way to Sarek's quarters which, he was surprised to see when they were admitted by a smiling Amanda, had not been made up to suit Vulcan taste. He would have thought that Spock would have seen to that. He said, "I'm sorry to disturb you. But I must speak with your husband."

"He's been gone for some time. It's his habit to meditate in private before retiring. What's wrong? Spock?"

At that moment the door opened again and Sarek entered. "You want something of me, Captain?"

Kirk observed that he looked somewhat tense, not exactly with anxiety, but as though he were fighting something back. "Ambassador, the Tellarite Gav has been found murdered. His neck was broken—in what Spock describes as *tal-shaya.*"

Sarek glanced at his son, lifting an eyebrow in the same familiar manner. "Indeed? Interesting."

"Ambassador, where were you in the past hour?"

"This is ridiculous, Captain," Amanda said. "You aren't accusing him…?"

Spock said, "If only on circumstantial evidence, he is a logical suspect, Mother."

"I quite agree," Sarek said, but he seemed more tense than before. "I was in private meditation. Spock will tell you that such meditation is a personal experience, not to be discussed. Certainly not with Earthmen."

"That's a convenient excuse, Ambassador, but…"

He broke off as Sarek gasped and started to crumple. He went to his knees before Kirk and Spock could catch him, clutching at his rib cage. A moan escaped him; any pain that could force such a sound from a Vulcan must have been agonizing indeed.

McCoy took a quick reading, then took out a pressure hypo, set it, and gave Sarek a quick injection. Then he went back to the instruments, taking more time with them now.

"What's wrong?" Amanda asked him.

"I don't know—I can't be sure with Vulcan physiology. It looks like something to do with his cardiovascular system, but…"

"Can you help him, Bones?"

"I don't know *that* yet, either."

Kirk looked at mother and son in turn. Spock was as expressionless as always, but Amanda's eyes were haunted; not even years of adaptation to Vulcan tradition could cover a worry of this kind.

"I must go off duty," he told her apologetically. "Still another problem confronts me in the morning, for which I'll need a fresh mind. Should I be needed here before then, Dr McCoy will of course call me."

"I quite understand, Captain," she said gently. "Good night, and thank you."

A truly remarkable woman.

Not much progress, it turned out on the next trip, had been made on the problem of the ship shadowing the *Enterprise.* Readings taken during the brief attempt at interception showed only that it either had a high-density hull or was otherwise cloaked against sensor probes. It was definitely manned, but by what? The Romulans had nothing like it, nor did the Federation or neutral planets, and that it was Klingon seemed even more unlikely.

Two fragmentary transmissions had been picked up, in an unknown code—with a reception point somewhere inside the *Enterprise* herself. Kirk ordered the locator field tightened to include only the interior of his own ship; if somebody aboard had a personal receiver—as seemed all too likely now—it might be pinned down, *if* the shadow sent another such message.

There seemed to be nothing further to be done on that for the moment. With Spock, whose only concern over his father's illness seemed to be over its possible adverse effect upon the mission, Kirk paid a visit to Sickbay. Sarek was bedded down there, with McCoy and Nurse Christine Chapel trying to make sense of the strange reports the body function panel was giving them; Amanda hovered in the door, trying to keep out of the way. As for Sarek himself, he looked as though he felt inconvenienced, but no longer in uncontrollable pain.

"How is he, Bones?"

"As far as I can tell, our prime suspect has a malfunction in one of the heart valves. I couldn't make a closer diagnosis on a Vulcan without an exploratory. Mrs Sarek, has he had any previous attacks of this sort?"

"No," Amanda said.

"Yes," Sarek said almost simultaneously. "There were three others. My physician prescribed benjasidrine for the condition."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Amanda asked.

"There was nothing you could have done. The prognosis was not serious, providing I retired, which, of course, I did."

"When did you have these attacks, Ambassador?" McCoy said.

"Two before my retirement. The third, while I was meditating on the Observation Deck when the Tellarite was murdered. I was quite incapacitated."

"I saw you taking a pill not long before that," Kirk said. "If you'll give one to Dr McCoy for analysis, it should provide circumstantial evidence in your favor. Were there any witnesses to the Observation Deck attack?"

"None. I do not meditate among witnesses."

"Too bad. Mr Spock, you're a scientist and you know Vulcan. Is there a standard procedure for this condition?"

"In view of its reactivation by Sarek's undertaking this mission," Spock said, "the logical approach would be a cryogenic open-heart operation."

"Unquestionably," Sarek said.

"For that, the patient will need tremendous amounts of blood," McCoy said. "Christine, check the blood bank and see if we've got enough Vulcan blood and plasma. I strongly suspect that we don't have enough even to begin such an operation."

"There are other Vulcans aboard."

"You will find," Sarek said, "that my blood type is T-negative. It is rare. That my two aides should be lacking this factor is highly unlikely."

"I, of course," Spock said, "also have T-negative blood."

"There are human factors in your blood that would have to be filtered out, Mr Spock," Christine said. "You just couldn't give enough to compensate for that."

"Not necessarily," Spock said. "There is a drug which speeds up replacement of blood in physiologies like ours…"

"I know the one you mean," McCoy said. "But it's still experimental and has worked only on a Rigellian. The two physiologies are similar, but not identical. Even with the Rigellian, it put a tremendous strain on the liver and the spleen, to say nothing of the bone marrow—and I'd have to give it to *both* of you. Plus which, I've never operated on a Vulcan. I've studied Vulcan anatomy, but that's a lot different from having actual surgical experience. If I don't kill Sarek with the operation, the drug probably will; it might kill both of them."

Sarek said, "I consider the safety factor to be low, but acceptable."

"Well, I don't," McCoy said, "and in this Sickbay, what I think is law. I can't sanction it."

"And *I* refuse to permit it," Amanda said. "I won't risk both of you…"

"You must understand, Mother," Spock said. "The chances of finding sufficient T-negative blood otherwise are vanishingly small. I would estimate them at…"

"Please don't," Amanda said.

"Then you automatically condemn Sarek to death," Spock said evenly. "And Doctor, you have no choice either. You must operate, and you have both the drug and a donor."

"It seems the only answer," Sarek said.

Reluctantly, McCoy nodded. Amanda turned a stricken face to Kirk, but he could offer her no help; he could not even help himself in this dilemma.

"I don't like it either, Amanda, believe me," he said. "But we must save your husband. You know very well, too, how much I value your son; but if we must risk him too, then we must. Doctor McCoy has agreed—and I learned long ago never to overrule him in such matters. In fact, I have made him the only officer on the *Enterprise* who has the power to give *me* orders. Please try to trust him as I do."

"And as I do also," Spock said, to McCoy's obvious startlement.

"I'll—try," Amanda said.

"You can do no more. Should you need me, I'll be at my station."

With a great deal more distress than he hoped he had shown, Kirk bowed formally and left.

And halfway to the bridge, deep in thought, he was jumped from behind.

A heavy blow to the head with some sort of club staggered him, but he nevertheless managed to throw his assailant from him against the wall. He got a quick impression of a figure taller but slighter than his own, and the flash of a bladed weapon. In the melee that followed, the other man proved himself to be an experienced in-fighter, and Kirk was already dazed by the first blow. He managed at last to drop bis opponent, perhaps permanently—but not before getting the knife in his own back.

He barely made it to an intercom before losing consciousness.

He came to semiconsciousness to the sound of McCoy's voice.

"It's a bad wound—punctured the left lung. A centimeter or so lower and it would have gone through the heart. Thank goodness he had sense enough not to try to pull the knife out, if he had time to think of it at all."

"The attacker was Thelev. Unconscious, but not seriously injured; just knocked about quite a lot." That was Spock. "He must have caught the Captain by surprise. I'll be in the brig, questioning him, and Shras as well."

"Doctor." This time it was Christine Chapel's voice. "The K-two factor is dropping."

"Spock," McCoy said, "Your father is much worse. There's no longer a choice. I'll have to operate immediately. We can begin as soon as you're prepared."

"No," Spock said.

"What?"

Then came Amanda's voice. "Spock, the little chance your father has depends entirely on you. You volunteered."

"My immediate responsibility is to the ship," Spock said. "Our passengers' safety is, by Starfleet order, of first importance. We are being followed by an alien, possibly hostile ship. I cannot relinquish command under these circumstances."

"You can turn command over to Scott," McCoy said harshly.

"On what grounds, Doctor? Command requirements do not recognize personal privilege. I will be in the brig interrogating the Andorian."

Then the darkness closed down again. When he awoke once more, he felt much better. Opening his eyes, he saw Sarek in the bed beside him, apparently asleep, with McCoy and Christine bending over him.

Kirk tried to rise. The attempt provoked a wave of dizziness and nausea and he promptly lay down again—even before McCoy, who had turned instantly at the motion, had to order him to.

"Let that be a lesson to you," McCoy said. "Just lie there and be happy you're still alive."

"How's Sarek?"

"Not good. If I could only operate…"

"What's stopping you? Oh, I remember now. Well, Spock's right, Bones. I can't damn him for his loyalty, or for doing his duty. But I'm not going to let him commit patricide."

He sat up, swinging his feet off the bed. McCoy caught his shoulders, preventing him from rising. "Jim, you can't even stand up. You could start the internal bleeding again."

"Bones, Sarek will die without that operation." McCoy nodded. "And you can't operate without the transfusions from Spock." Again a nod. "I'll convince Spock I'm all right, and order him to report here. Once he's off the bridge, I'll turn command over to Scotty and go to my quarters. Will that fill your prescription?"

"Well, no—but it sounds like the best compromise. Let me give you a hand up."

"Gladly."

McCoy supported him all the way to the bridge, but released him just before the elevator doors snapped open. Spock turned, looking surprised and pleased, but masking it immediately.

"Captain."

Kirk stepped very carefully down to his command chair. He tried to appear as though he were casually surveying the bridge, though in fact he was keeping precarious hold of his balance as spasms of dizziness swept him. McCoy remained glued to his side, but ostentatiously offered him not so much as a hand.

Spock came down into the well of the bridge as Kirk reached his chair and eased himself into it. Kirk smiled and nodded approval.

"I'll take over, Spock. Report to Sickbay with Dr McCoy."

Spock was studying him closely. Kirk was fighting off the dizziness, at least enough—he hoped—to keep it from showing, but he knew also that he was very pale, about which he could do nothing.

"Captain, are you quite all right?"

"I've certified him physically fit, Mr Spock," McCoy said testily. "Now, I have an operation to perform. And since both of us are required…"

He gestured toward the elevator. Spock hesitated briefly, still studying Kirk, who said kindly, "Get out of here, Spock."

Spock nodded, and left with McCoy with something very like alacrity.

"Mr Chekov," Kirk said, "what is the status of the intruder ship?"

"No change, sir. Maintaining its distance."

"Any further transmissions, Lt. Uhura?"

"None, sir."

Kirk nodded, relaxed a little—and found that he had to pull himself together sharply as the dizziness returned. "Call Mr Scott to the bridge…"

"Captain," Chekov interrupted. "The alien vessel is moving closer!"

"Belay that last order, Lt. Uhura. I'm staying here." But the dizziness kept coming back. He raised a hand to wipe his brow and found that it was shaking.

"Captain," Uhura said. "I'm picking up the alien signal again. But it's coming from inside the *Enterprise*—from the brig."

"Call Security and order an immediate search of the prisoner. Tell them this time to look for implants."

Hours of weakness seemed to pass before the command communicator buzzed. Lt. Josephs' voice said, "Security, Captain. I had to stun the prisoner. He has some sort of transceiver imbedded in one of his antennae, sir; it broke off in my hand. I didn't know they were that delicate."

"They aren't. Thanks, Lieutenant. Neutralize it and send it to Mr Scott for analysis. Kirk out."

"Captain," Chekov said. "The alien ship has changed course and speed. Moving directly toward us at Warp Eight."

"Lt. Uhura, tell Lt. Josephs to bring the prisoner to the bridge. Mr Chekov, deflectors on. Red alert. Phasers stand by for fire on my signal."

"Aye, sir." The alarm began to sound. "Shields on. Phasers manned and ready."

"Take over Spock's scanners. Ensign, take the helm."

A blip appeared in the viewscreen and flashed by. It loomed large for an instant, but it was only a blur at this speed. Suddenly the bridge was slammed and rocked. The *Enterprise* had been hit.

"Damage, Mr Chekov!"

"None, sir; deflected. Target moving away. Turning now. He's coming around again."

"Fire phasers as he passes, Ensign. Steady… Fire!"

Chekov studied the scanner. "Clean miss, sir."

At the same moment, there was another jolt. "Report on their weaponry."

"Sensors report standard phasers, sir."

Standard phasers. Good. The enemy had more speed, but they weren't giants.

Another wave of weakness passed through him. The *Enterprise* seemed to be standing up so far, but he was none too sure of himself.

"Captain, the intercom is jammed," Uhura said. "All the Ambassadors are asking what's going on."

"Tell them to—tell them to take a good guess, but *clear that board,* Lieutenant!"

The ship shook furiously again.

"Captain," Uhura said, "I've got an override from Dr McCoy. He says that another shock like that and he may lose both patients."

"Tell him this is probably only the beginning. Mr Chekov, lock fire control into the computers. Set photon torpedoes two, four and six for widest possible scatter at the three highest intercept probabilities…"

The enemy flashed by. The torpedoes bloomed harmlessly on the viewscreen. Another slam. Kirk's head reeled.

"Number four shield has buckled."

"Auxiliary power."

"Sir, Mr Scott reports auxiliary power is being called upon by Sickbay."

"Divert."

"Switching over—shields finning up. Number four still weak, sir. If they hit us there again, it'll go altogether."

"Set computer to drop to number three and switch auxiliary back to Sickbay if it goes."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk heard the elevator doors open behind him, and then Lt. Josephs and another security guard were hustling Thelev before him, without ceremony. It took Kirk a moment to remember that he had ordered exactly this interruption. He stared harshly at the prisoner.

"Your friends out there are good," he said. "But they'll have to blast this ship to dust to win."

"That was intended from the beginning, Captain," Thelev said. He was, Kirk noted with a certain satisfaction, still rather lumpy from his attempt at killing, an impression heightened by the missing antenna. The small wound there had healed, but it looked more as though it had been a deep cut than the loss of a major organ.

"You're not an Andorian. What did it take to make you over?"

The *Enterprise* rocked again. Chekov said, "Shield four down."

"Damage control procedures, all decks," Kirk said. Then, to Thelev; "That ship out there carries phasers. It's faster than we are, but weapon for weapon, we have it outgunned."

Thelev only smiled. "Have you hit it yet, Captain?"

Another shock, and a heavier one. Chekov said, "Shield three weakening. Shall I redivert auxiliary power, sir?"

This was getting them nowhere; if it continued sheerly as a battle of attrition, the *Enterprise* would lose. And there was the operation to consider.

"Engineering, this is the Captain. Blank out all power on the port side of the ship except for phaser banks. On my signal, cut starboard power. Kirk out." He turned back to Thelev. "Who are you?"

"Find your own answers, Captain. You haven't long to live."

"You're a spy, surgically altered to pass an an Andorian. You were planted in the Ambassador's party to use terror and murder to disrupt us and prepare for this attack."

"Speculation, Captain."

The ship shook again. Chekov said, "Shield three is gone, sir."

"Engineering, blank out starboard power, all decks. Maintain until further orders."

The lights on the bridge went out, except for gleams from the telltales on the panels, and the glow of stars from the viewscreen. In the dimness, Thelev at last looked slightly alarmed. "What are you doing?" he said.

"*You* speculate."

"We're starting to drift, Captain," Chekov said. "Shall I hold her on course?"

"No. Stand by your phasers, Mr Chekov."

"Aye, sir. Phasers standing by."

A blip of pulsing light again appeared in the screen, slowed down, held steady. Kirk leaned forward intently.

"He's just hovering out there, sir."

"Looking us over," Kirk said. "We're dead—as far as he knows. No starship commander would deliberately expose his ship like this, especially one stuffed with notables—or that's what I hope he thinks."

"Range decreasing. Sublight speed."

"Hold your fire."

"Still closing—range one hundred thousand kilometers—phasers locked on target…"

"Fire."

The blip flared brightly on the screen. A jubilant shout went up from Chekov. "Got him!"

"Lt. Uhura, open a hailing frequency. If they wish to surrender…"

He was interrupted by a glaring burst of light from the viewscreen. Everyone instinctively ducked; the light was blinding. When Kirk could see the screen again, there was nothing on it but stars.

"They could not surrender, Captain," Thelev said. "The ship had orders to self-destruct."

"Lt. Uhura, relay to Starfleet Command. Tell them we have a prisoner."

"Only temporarily, Captain," Thelev said. "You see, I had self-destruct orders, too. Slow poison—quite painless, actually, but there is no known antidote. I anticipate another ten minutes of life."

Kirk turned to the security guards. "Take him to Sickbay," he said harshly.

Josephs and the guard came down to flank Thelev, and began to shepherd him toward the elevator. As they reached the door, the spy crumpled, sagged, fell to his knees. He said tonelessly, "I seem to—have—miscalculated…"

He fell face down and was still. Kirk rose wearily.

"So did they," he said. "Put him in cold storage for an autopsy. Secure for General Quarters. Mr Chekov, take over."

He went down to the operating room. It was empty, the operating table clear, the instruments mutely inactive. After a moment, McCoy came in from the Sickbay area. He looked as drawn and tired as Kirk felt.

"Bones?"

"Are you quite through shaking this ship around?" the surgeon asked.

"Sarek—Spock—how are they?"

"I don't mind telling you, you make things difficult for a surgeon conducting a delicate operation which…"

"Bones!"

The Sickbay doors opened again and Amanda appeared. "Captain, come in," she said. Kirk shoved past McCoy eagerly.

Inside, Sarek and Spock occupied two of the three beds, side by side. Both looked pale and exhausted, but reasonably chipper. Amanda sat down happily beside Sarek.

"That pigheaded Vulcan stamina," McCoy's voice said behind him. "I couldn't have pulled them through without it."

"Some doctors have all the luck."

"Captain," Spock said. "I believe the alien…"

"We damaged their ship," Kirk said. "They destroyed it to avoid capture. Bones, Thelev's body is being brought to your lab. I want an autopsy as soon as you feel up to it."

"I believe you'll find he's what's usually called an Orion, Doctor," Spock said. "There are intelligence reports that Orion smugglers have been raiding the Coridian system."

"But what could they gain by an attack on us?" Kirk asked.

"Mutual suspicion," Sarek suggested, "and perhaps interplanetary war."

Kirk nodded. "With Orion carefully neutral. She'd clean up by supplying dilithium to both sides—and continue to raid Coridan."

"It was the power utilization curve that confused me," Spock said. "I did not realize that until I was just going under the anesthetic. The curve made it appear more powerful than a starship—than anything known to us. That ship was constructed for a suicide mission. Since they never intended to return to base, they could utilize one hundred per cent power in their attacks. I cannot understand why I didn't realize that earlier."

Kirk looked at Sarek. "You might have had a few other things on your mind."

"That does not seem likely."

"No," Kirk said wryly. "But thank you anyway."

"And you, Sarek," Amanda said. "Would you also say thank you to your son?"

"I do not understand."

"For saving your life."

"Spock behaved in the only logical manner open to him," Sarek said. "One does not thank logic, Amanda."

Amanda stiffened and exploded. "Logic! Logic! I am sick to death of logic. Do you want to know how I feel about your logic?"

The two Vulcans studied the angry woman as though she were some sort of exhibit. Spock glanced at his father and said, quite conversationally, "Emotional, isn't she?"

"She has always been that way."

"Indeed? Why did you marry her?"

"At the time," Sarek said solemnly, "it seemed the logical thing to do."

Amanda stared at them, stunned. Kirk could not help grinning, and McCoy was grinning, too. Amanda, turning to them in appeal, was startled; and then, obviously, suddenly realized that her leg was being pulled. A smile broke over her face.

Equally suddenly, the room reeled. Kirk grabbed the edge of the table. Instantly, McCoy was beside him, guiding him toward the third bed.

"Bones—really—I'm all right."

"If you keep arguing with your kindly family doctor, you'll spend the next ten days right here. Cooperate and you'll get out in two."

Kirk subsided, but now Spock was sitting up. "If you don't mind, Doctor, I'll report to my own station now."

McCoy pointed firmly at the bed. "You're at your station, Spock."

The First Officer shrugged and settled back. McCoy surveyed his three restive patients with an implacable expression.

"Bones," Kirk said, "I think you're enjoying this."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock agreed. "I've never seen him look so happy."

"Shut up," McCoy commanded. There was a long silence. McCoy's expression gradually changed to one of incredulity.

"Well, what do you know?" he said to Amanda. "I finally got the last word!"

A PRIVATE LITTLE WAR

(Don Ingalls and Gene Roddenberry)

McCoy stretched his back muscles, tired from bending over his collection of soil, leaves and roots. Starfleet had something, he thought. This planet's plant culture just might be a medical El Dorado. But he was glad when his communicator beeped. This clearing in the forest was lonely.

Kirk said, "How much longer, Bones?"

"About another thirty minutes, Jim. You and Spock find anything?"

"No sign of inhabitants so far. Continue collecting. Kirk out." As he closed his communicator, Spock pointed to the scuffled stones on the rocky ledge where they stood. "The apelike carnivore of the reports, Captain?"

Kirk inspected the tracks. He straightened, nodding. "The gumato. But this spoor is several days old. No problem. They seldom stay in one place."

Spock eyed the sweep of trees sloping downhill from their ledge. "Aside from that, you say it's a Garden of Eden, sir?"

Kirk grinned. "So it seemed years ago to a brash young Lieutenant named Kirk in command of his first planet survey." He stiffened, hearing a branch break. Then he saw the people below moving along a narrow trail cut through the trees. With a shock of pleasure, he recognized their leader; and was about to shout "Tyree!" when his eye caught the glint of sun on a gun barrel. Guns—on this planet! He seized his phaser and Spock said quietly, "Use of our weapons was expressly forbidden, Captain."

"Tyree is leading those people into ambush! He's the friend I lived with here!" He wheeled; and kicking hard at a rock outcropping, loosed it to send it careening down the slope. The ambusher's exploded from their concealing underbrush and Tyree cried, "*Villagers!*"

His group broke, rushing for the trees' shelter. But one of the ambushers, turning, had seen Kirk and Spock. He yelled something to the other two; and all three ambushers burst into a

fast run up the hill toward the *Enterprise* men. Then the first paused to place a flintlock musket against his shoulder. The bullet *pinged* past Kirk's ear to strike spray from the rock behind him. The man pulled up to reload—and the second villager fired. Hot metal tore into Spock.

In his clearing McCoy heard the shots. Snatching his communicator, he opened it, crying, "*Enterprise*, alert! Alert! Stand by to beam up landing party!"

Spock was down. Running to him, Kirk took one look at the wound; and grabbing his phaser, aimed it at their pursuers.

"No… Captain…"

"Spock, they'll be reloaded in a moment!"

On a surge of agonized effort, Spock staggered to his feet. "No, I… can travel."

Looking up, Kirk saw McCoy and cried, "Beam us up fast, Bones!" McCoy had his communicator open. "*Now*, Scotty! Spock's hurt! Have medics standing by!'"

Kirk, supporting the half-conscious Spock, pulled him into a threesome with McCoy. As they dematerialized, the three villagers were left to stare at the sparkle into which they'd disappeared.

An agitated Scott was at the Transporter platform to meet them. "What happened, Captain?"

"Lead projectile. Old-style firearm. Tell those medics to bring the stretcher closer!"

As the reeling Spock was eased onto it, Nurse Chapel and Doctor M'Benga hurried into the Transporter Room. McCoy, his eyes on Spock's torn chest, said, "Vitalizer B." Christine Chapel swiftly adjusted a hypo and McCoy pressed it, hissing, against Spock's limp arm. It was as she reached into her medikit that Spock subsided into unconsciousness. M'Benga, his medical scanner humming, passed it over the motionless body.

Christine spoke to McCoy. "Pressure packet ready, Doctor."

He took it; and lifting Spock's shirt, pushed it into the wound. "Lucky his heart's where his liver should be—or he'd be dead now." It wasn't a joke. His face was grim. "Set hypo for coradrenalin."

As the syringe hissed again, Kirk spoke. "Bones, you can save him, can't you?"

Without warning, alarm sirens shrieked. Sinister red lights flashed and Uhura's filtered voice said, "*All decks, red alert! Battle*

stations! This is no drill. Battle stations! Red alert!"

Kirk leaped to the intercom. "Bridge, this is the Captain."

"Lieutenant Uhura, sir. We have a Klingon vessel on our screens."

"On my way!"

He was at the door when he brought up short. Looking back to where McCoy was working over Spock, he said, "Bones…"

"I don't know, Jim!"

Choices. Kirk opened the door to a corridor, hideous with the screech of sirens. They were screaming on the bridge, too. Chekov had taken Spock's position at the library computer; and Uhura, motionless at her board, was listening intently. Chekov looked up as Kirk, Scott on his heels, ran from the elevator. "No change of position, sir. They may not have seen us. We're holding the planet between us and the Klingon."

Uhura moved in her chair. "Make that definite. They're sending a routine message to their home base. No mention of us, sir."

"Then reduce to alert one, Lieutenant."

She hit her intercom button. "All stations, go to yellow alert. Repeat, cancel battle stations. Remain on yellow alert."

The sirens stilled. Kirk crossed to the helm, checked it; and turned to look at the viewing screen. All it held was the image of the planet.

"Think you can keep us out of their sight, Scotty?"

Scott moved a control on the helm. "I can try, sir."

He spoke to Chekov. "Lock scanners into astrogation circuits."

"Locking in, sir."

"Message to Starbase, Captain?" Uhura asked.

Kirk shook his head. "No point in giving ourselves away, Lieutenant. Not until we find out what's going on."

"We can hide for a while, Captain." Scott had turned from the helm. "But we may have to leave orbit to keep it up long."

Kirk nodded. He went to his command position to hit the intercom button on his panel. "Captain to Sickbay."

"McCoy here. I'll call you as soon as I know anything. I don't now. Sickbay out."

So that was that. As they say, time would tell. Time alone would tell whether Spock would survive to live another day—or whether he wouldn't. Kirk struggled against an upsurge of panic. It

wouldn't do. Another subject—one to take the mind off Spock's peril. He turned to Scott.

"That Klingon is breaking the treaty," he said.

"Not necessarily, sir. They've as much right to scientific missions here as we have."

"Research is hardly the Klingon preoccupation."

"True, Captain. But since that's a 'hands off' planet, you can't prove they're up to anything else."

Kirk frowned. "When I left that planet seventeen years ago, the villagers down there had barely learned to forge iron into crude plows. But Spock was shot by a flintlock. How many centuries between those two developments?"

Uhura answered. "On Earth about twelve centuries, sir."

"On the other hand," Scott said, "a flintlock would be the first type firearm the inhabitants would normally develop."

Kirk snapped, "I'm aware of that, Mr Scott."

Chekov spoke. "And, sir, the fact that Earth took twelve centuries doesn't mean they have to."

Over at her board Uhura nodded. "We've seen development at different rates on different planets."

"If it were the Klingons behind this, why didn't they give them breechloaders?" Scott asked. "Or machine guns? Or early hand lasers or—"

Kirk interrupted, angry. "I made a simple comment. I didn't invite a debate."

But Scott didn't waver. "Captain, you made a *number* of comments. And you've always insisted that we give you honest reactions. If that's changed, sir…"

"It hasn't," Kirk said. He swung his chair around. "I'm sorry. I'm worried about Spock. And I'm concerned about something that's happened to what I once knew down there." He got up and made for the elevator. "You have the con, Scotty. I'll be waiting in Sickbay."

He could feel the controlled tension in Sickbay the moment he entered it. McCoy, Doctor M'Benga and Christine were all gathered around Spock's still-unconscious form. The sterilite above it swathed it in its eerie glow. Kirk glanced up at the body-functions panel. Its readings were ominously low. There was, of course, the factor of Spock's different Vulcan physiology. But Christine was looking very troubled. And Spock might have been dead, so lifeless he looked on the table.

M’Benga spoke. “We’ve no replacements for the damaged organs, Doctor. If he’s going to heal, his Vulcan physiology will have to do it for him.”

“Agreed,” McCoy said. “Sterilite off.” He moved to his office. Kirk followed him. They eyed each other for a long moment. Then McCoy said, “He may live. He may die. I don’t know which.”

Kirk paced the distance to the door and back to McCoy’s desk. McCoy gestured to the exam room. “Doctor M’Benga interned in a Vulcan hospital, Jim. Spock couldn’t be in better hands.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Yes.”

Kirk hesitated. Then he came to his hard decision. “All right. You and I are transporting back down to the planet, Bones.”

“I can’t leave Spock at such a time.”

“You just indicated you could.” He leaned his hands on McCoy’s desk. “There are Klingons down there. If their mission is a legitimate research interest in the planet’s organic potential, you’re the one man who can tell me.”

“And if that’s not it?”

“Then I’ll need help.” He pointed to the exam room. “I’ll need advice I can trust as much as I trust Spock’s.”

“That’s a rare compliment, Jim, but—”

Kirk flared. “Blast it, McCoy, I’m worried about Spock, too! But if the Klingons are breaking the ‘hands off’ treaty here, there could be an interstellar war at stake!” He strode to the office intercom. Hitting the button, he said, “Captain to bridge.”

“Scott here, sir.”

“McCoy and I are beaming back down. Inform ship’s stores we’ll need native costumes.”

“Captain, I may have to break orbit any minute to keep out of their sight. We’d be out of communication range with you.”

Kirk was thinking fast. The secrecy of their presence was vital. Any attempt to contact Starfleet Command could reveal it. Asking permission to violate orders concerning this “hands off” planet was a risk he dare not take. He’d have to act alone, on his own judgment.

He turned back to the intercom. “I understand, Scotty. We’ll set up a rendezvous schedule. Captain out.”

They materialized near a copse of trees. Glancing around, Kirk got his bearings. The copse dipped to a rocky glade he remembered. Tyree's camp was about a quarter of a mile distant.

McCoy, tricorder out, said, "Want to think about this again, Jim? Starfleet's orders are no interference with this planet's state."

"'With its normal social development.' I'm not only aware of the orders, Bones. It was my survey seventeen years ago that recommended them."

McCoy nodded. "I read your report. 'Inhabitants superior in many ways to humans. Left alone, they will undoubtedly someday develop a remarkably advanced and peaceful culture.'"

"And I intend to see that they get their chance. Are you coming with me, Doctor?"

They moved off down the shale of the glade. The terrain ahead showed bigger rocks and a thick growth of underbrush. McCoy was still troubled; but Kirk, recognizing familiar landmarks, was buoyant. He gestured to some foliage. "The saplings over there, they make good bows. We used to choose our wood from this very spot."

"Almost like coming home, eh?"

"It'll be good to see Tyree again. During that year here, we were made brothers. I lived with his family, wore his Hillpeople clothes. We hunted together…"

McCoy halted abruptly. "All right, Jim. I'll try just once more."

Kirk turned, his eyes questioning. McCoy's met them unflinchingly. "So you love this place. Fine! So you want to see an old friend again. Also fine! You believe the Klingons are here, threatening all that you admire so much."

"Bones, we've been over this—"

"You asked me to replace Spock's advice and judgment! Well, I'm doing the best I can to!" There was a deep, sincere concern in McCoy's face. "Jim, I admire a Starship Captain willing to disobey orders—and risk his career when necessary. But how much of this decision of yours is emotion… and how much of it is logic?"

Kirk's mouth moved in a small smile. "Logic? I suppose Spock *would* ask that." He pondered the question. "I *do* have an emotional attachment to this place. That's obvious. However—"

McCoy interrupted again. "Spock might also suggest that for twenty-four hours we reconnoiter—and obey orders, making no contacts. If you decide to move in after that, I'm with you."

Kirk looked at the earnest eyes. "All right, Bones. We stay out of sight for a day. We'll cut through here and—"

He never finished his sentence. There was a hoarse snarl—and a huge, hairy creature, faintly gorillalike, lips crawled back over its wicked teeth, *burst* out of a clump of brush where it had been biding. A clawed fist the size of a ham knocked Kirk from his feet. Then it leaped for McCoy in the very act of reaching for his phaser. He was slammed back into rock, the weapon knocked from his hand. He fell, stunned—and the aroused gumato turned on Kirk again. He went down once more, the beast's frothy jaws tearing at the flesh of his shoulder. McCoy, trying frantically to clear his head, stretched an arm toward his phaser. Kirk landed a hard kick in the animal's belly; but the fury of the alien thing clawed him down. McCoy grasped his phaser; and making a swift adjustment on it, snouted, "Jim… roll free so I can shoot!"

He fired a stun charge. The gumato staggered. Then it whirled on McCoy, roaring. He got to his knees, loosing the full phaser power. The gumato vanished. But Kirk lay still. McCoy crawled to him, medikit out.

"Contact ship," Kirk whispered. "I took… full poison… its fangs…"

The hypo hissed against his arm. Then McCoy spoke into his communicator. "Landing party to *Enterprise*, come in! *Enterprise, this is McCoy! Emergency. Come in!*"

Kirk's forehead was already beading with sweat. The poison was in his bloodstream. McCoy had to stoop to hear the weakening voice. "Afraid… they've left… orbit."

"Jim, there's no antitoxin for this." He used the hypo again. "I can keep you alive for only a few hours with these injections."

"Tyree… some of them have… cure."

Kirk slumped into unconsciousness. In the lonely silence, McCoy heard a twig snap. Three men, bows and spears at the ready, were standing behind him, suspicion and curiosity equally mingled in their faces.

"Are you Hillpeople? Do you know a hunter named Tyree?" McCoy gestured to Kirk. "A gumato attacked him. He's James Kirk, a friend of Tyree…" He waited for some response. None came. *Blast it, do something!*" he shouted. "*He's dying!*"

But the Hillpeople still stared at him stolidly.

Later, he was to feel-grateful to them. Their settlement was crude, even for a nomadic people—a place of fire-pits, log shelters and

primitive pottery. But the cave into which they carried Kirk's limp body was warm. And the pallet they laid him on was soft with animal skins. He was wet now with sweat and beginning to tremble violently. McCoy turned to the man who had directed them into the cave. "Yutan, more skins—blankets. I must keep him warm."

When the coverings came, McCoy piled them on Kirk. Tyree's woman—she was said to possess a cure for the effects of gumato venom. But both were absent from the camp. Superstition, anyway. And yet… there was Starfleet's extraordinary interest in the medical promise of this planet's organic substances…

Kirk was babbling in the first stages of delirium. It would reach its climax. Then coma and death. McCoy looked desperately around the cave. Slowly he got to his feet. Incredibly the boulder opposite him moved when he pushed it. Straining against its weight, he rolled it over beside Kirk. After a moment he went toward another one. "You and your 'Garden of Eden,'" he muttered. "First Spock, now you. Maybe Adam was better off out of Eden."

Tyree and his woman were crouched in the shadow of a rocky overhang, watching a file of villagers pass down a trail, armed with their flintlocks. Though the woman's wild black hair had never known a comb, her thin features held intelligence and a savage beauty. She leaned to Tyree, whispering urgently. "We must obtain the same firesticks, husband! We could take their goods, their horses—kill them!"

"Enough!" he rebuked. "In time the villagers will return to the ways of friendship."

She spotted a small plant beside her. Its root came up to the prize of her sharp-bladed knife. "In time?" she said. "How many of us must continue to die waiting for this 'time' of yours?"

Tyree opened her small leather bag for her. As she dropped the root into it, she said, "I am a *Kahn-ut-tu* woman, Tyree! In all this land there are few of us. Men seek us for mates because through us they can become great leaders!"

He smiled at her. "I took you for mate because you cast a spell upon me, Nona."

She withdrew an odd-shaped leaf from her bag. The look in her brilliant dark eyes was openly inviting. "And I have spells to keep you!" She crushed the leaf until its heady scent had impregnated

her fingers. "Remember this fragrance? The night we camped by the water…?"

He pushed her away. "Yes. The night of madness."

She caressed his face with her scented fingers. His eyelids drooped. She leaned closer to him. "Madness? Did you really hate *that* madness, Tyree?"

"No," he pleaded. "Nona, no. It calls up evil beasts from my soul."

"Only one lovely beast, Tyree… you, my strong, angry man."

His arms went around her. He was drawing her down to the leaves when Yutan, running, broke through the trees. Nona looked up; and he stopped dead at the look in her eyes.

"For… forgive me," he stammered. "But there are strangers in the camp. One has taken a gumato bite. He dies."

Nona was on her feet. "Strangers? Explain."

"It is said that the dying one is a friend of Tyree. From long ago."

Tyree was still fighting the intoxicating effects of the leaf's odor; but Nona, in full command of herself, nodded. "That one!" she exclaimed. "I go. Bring Tyree when his head clears."

Kirk was moaning in the clutch of his delirium. McCoy went to the cave entrance. The curious crowd that had thronged it had disappeared. He pulled his phaser, aimed it at one of the boulders beside Kirk, and fired it. The rock glowed red with heat. With perhaps too much. He bent over the phaser to readjust it—and Nona, a dark ghost, slipped into the cave. She looked from the red rock to the weapon in McCoy's hands, her face alive with fascinated interest. Pulling back into the shadows, she watched the phaser beam strike the other boulder. It, too, went red. Nona turned and left the cave as silently as she'd entered it.

Tyree, Yutan beside him, was running toward it. She extended a hand. "Stop!" she said. "Do you want me to save him?"

Her tone halted him. "You must!" he cried. "He is the one I told you of, the friend of my young days!"

She had seen a miracle—a firestick of marvelous power. A *Kahn-ut-tu* woman knew how to take advantage of miraculous opportunities. Wife to a supreme leader of men…

"My remedies," she said, "require full knowledge of the people they cure. I must know all that is known of your friend."

Tyree shook his head. "I gave him the Promise of Silence, Nona. He was made *my* brother!"

"And I am your wife—his sister. I promise silence also. *Quickly*, Tyree. Or he dies!"

Spock had still to recover consciousness. Christine Chapel, frightened, looked away from the low readings on his body-functions panel. Maybe his pulse… She took it and her hand slipped down to hold his. Words she didn't know were in her came to her lips. "Mr Spock, you've hardly ever noticed me… and I understand. You can't. But—I'd give my life to save you…"

Sickbay's door opened. She hurriedly replaced Spock's arm on the bed—but M'Benga had seen.

He examined the panel. "Don't let those readings unduly trouble you. I've seen this before in Vulcans. It's their way of concentrating their strength, blood and antibodies on the injured organs." He eyed the pale face on the pillow. "A form of self-induced hypnosis."

"You mean he's actually conscious, Doctor?"

"In a sense. He knows we're here and what we're saying. But he can't take his mind from the tissue he is fighting to heal. I suppose," he added, "that he even knows you were holding his hand."

He left her, eyes averted from the painful flush that flooded her face. She moved to gather up some charts. Then she turned to address the still form on the bed. "Mr Spock," she said, "a good nurse holds the hands of all patients. It proves to them that one is… interested."

The lie made her feel much better.

The boulders were cooling. But it was still very hot in the cave. McCoy brushed sweat from his face and bent to pull back Kirk's eyelid. He shook his head; and was drawing a blanket closer about him when Tyree and Nona walked into the cave.

The man spoke at once. "I am Tyree." He strode to Kirk as one who had the right, passing the dull red rocks without a glance. But McCoy's interest was focused on Nona. She was emptying the contents of a small leather bag on a flat rock. He moved in to

watch her over her shoulder. "And I am Tyree's woman," she told him without turning.

On the rock's flat surface lay a root, wet, covered with small open spores. Nona drew her razor-edged knife, pressed its blade on the root—and it began to writhe. She picked it up on the flat of her knife, speaking briefly. "A Mahko root."

"A plant?" said the wary McCoy. "It moves."

"For one who knows where to find it and how to pick it."

Tyree was kneeling at Kirk's head, his kindly face anxious. When Nona approached them, he pulled back so that she could seat herself next to his friend, the root still moving on the knife blade. When she touched Kirk's throat with her free hand, his mouth opened slightly. She leaned over him gently; and exhaling a long breath of her own between his lips, whispered, "Take this of my soul… this of my soul into thy soul… into thine…"

McCoy was shocked. He turned to Tyree, crying, "I was told she had a *cure!*"

"Be silent," he said sternly.

Nona was breathing more of her breath into Kirk's open mouth. She lifted unseeing eyes, chanting more of her strange incantation. "Deeply… deeply… deeply… we must become as one… as one… as one…"

To McCoy's total amazement, Kirk had begun to breathe evenly in time with the woman's breathing. But the mystic element in the chant horrified him. He had started toward Kirk when Tyree's strong arm barred the way. He saw Nona bare the exact spot on Kirk's shoulder where the gumato fangs had struck, and slap the twisting root on the punctures. Then, turning the knife on her own hand, she slashed it deeply and pressed it, bleeding, on top of the ugly root. She groaned with pain. Kirk echoed the groan as though he, too, felt the agony of the slash. She shut her eyes. Swaying, she chanted, "Together… your pain in mine… together… your soul in mine… together… together… together…"

Both of them were now inhaling in perfect unison. And to both, in unison, came easier breath, relaxation. Nona's eyes fluttered open. "Return… it is past… return… return… return…"

And Kirk's eyes, too, fluttered open. Against the animal skins of his pallet, his face was at peace.

Nona remained close to him for a long moment. Then very slowly she withdrew her hand from his shoulder. She extended it, palm up, to McCoy. It held no sign of knife wound, only the small, withered thing that had been the writhing root. She got to her

feet, making way for McCoy. But he didn't need to examine Kirk's shoulder. He knew what he'd find—and he found it. The flesh was healthy, unmarked.

Kirk smiled up at him. "I've been having… a strange dream."

"How do you feel, Jim?"

"I'm tired—just tired. You've done a fine job, Bones."

He was already asleep. McCoy looked up to see Tyree supporting Nona.

"Thank you for saving him. I'd like to learn more of this…"

"She must sleep now," Tyree said.

"Is there any condition I should watch for in him? Any aftereffect or danger?"

Nona spoke weakly. "Our blood has passed… through the Mahko root together… our souls have been together. He is mine now."

Startled, McCoy spoke to Tyree. "What does she mean, 'he's hers'?"

"When a man and a woman are joined in this manner, he can refuse her no wish." He smiled faintly. "But only a legend. There is no danger."

Tyree was leading her from the cave when she passed close to McCoy. Though her eyes were heavy with exhaustion, there was a look on her face that troubled McCoy. It suggested that she knew she had won some obscure victory. When he noted the same half-smile of satisfaction on Kirk's sleeping features, McCoy's sense of apprehension became definite.

It grew so insistent it aroused him from his deep sleep of weariness. The cave was black with night. His first conscious thought was of Kirk. He reached for his medikit and groped his way past the rocks to the pallet. It was empty.

He stood still for a moment, fully awake now. The layout of the camp was still unfamiliar to him. He moved to the cave entrance, trying to get his bearings in the darkness. To his left there was the darker shadow of a structure of some kind. It turned out to be a lean-to. The still-glowing embers of its firepit showed two sleepers. A dim form was standing over one of them.

"Jim?" McCoy whispered.

One of the sleepers awoke, rolling instantly into a crouch. It was Tyree. He stared at McCoy. Then, bounding to his feet, he turned and saw Kirk, eyes closed like a sleepwalker's, beside the sleeping body of his wife.

"Jim!" McCoy shook Kirk's arm. The eyes opened to fill with surprise. "Quite… all right, Bones. I felt better and thought I'd stretch my legs." He recognized Tyree; his face alight with pleasure, cried, "*Tyree! It is you, my old friend!*" His hand went out to grip the man's shoulder in genuine affection.

Nona had awakened. Tyree gave her a quick glance. There was a pause before he said, "Yes, James. It is good to see you."

"But what am I doing here? How did…? No, I remember now. A gumato bite. I was ill…" He gestured to McCoy. "I told the Doctor here, 'take me to Tyree's camp.' I knew you'd find a *Kahn-ut-tu* to cure me." He turned to McCoy. "The *Kahn-ut-tus* are a kind of local witch people… actually healers who have studied the herbs and roots here."

"And I am a *Kahn-ut-tu* woman, Captain." Nona smiled at Kirk. "I cured you."

Their eyes met; and Tyree said, "My woman. Nona."

In the light of the firepit's embers, the wild, disheveled black hair enhanced the savage beauty of her face. "Yes, of course," Kirk said. "Your woman."

McCoy spoke. "Tyree leads the Hillpeople here."

Kirk smiled at his friend. "Congratulations—on both counts."

"You need rest, Jim."

"Rest? I've never felt more alive!" Kirk's face sobered.

"Tyree, can we talk now? The villagers' new weapons. I want to hear all about that. We have plans to make."

Nona broke in. "Good. It is past time to plan."

Tyree nodded. "Yes, much has happened since you left. Come, we will speak of it—"

"And of things to be done!" said Nona.

Tyree looked at her. Then silently, he led the way out of the lean-to.

Spock lay as pale, as motionless as ever.

Doctor M'Benga, entering Sickbay, nodded to Christine; and going to Spock, leaned close to a pointed ear. He spoke very slowly and distinctly. "This is Doctor M'Benga, Mr Spock. There'll be someone with you constantly from now on. When the time comes, I'll be called." He straightened. "Nurse, stay with him."

Christine had her eyes on the body-functions panel. "The readings are beginning to fluctuate markedly, Doctor."

"So they should be," M'Benga said. "The moment he shows any sign of consciousness, call me immediately."

"Yes, Doctor."

He was making for the door when he turned. "After you have called me, if he speaks, do whatever he says."

"Whatever he says?"

"Yes, that's clear enough, isn't it?"

It was clear. It was also disconcerting. She looked at the pointed ears on the pillow. They suddenly struck her as extremely aristocratic.

Tyree was making good on his promise to bring Kirk up to date on the firearms question. "It's less than a year ago that their firesticks first came to the villagers. Since that time, my friend, almost one in three of us have died."

Kirk leaned forward over the rude table. "But you say they make the firesticks themselves? You can't be certain of that."

"We've looked into their village and saw it being done."

"Tyree," McCoy said, "have you seen strangers among the villagers?"

Tyree shook his head, "Never."

Behind them, unseen, Nona had slipped into the hut to immerse herself in the shadows of a corner. She watched McCoy turn to Kirk. "Meanwhile," he said, "you have made contact here. If it turns out that we are the ones who broke the 'hands off' treaty, it's your career, Jim."

"Perhaps, Bones. But it would hardly take a platoon of Klingons to teach them to make crude firearms."

"A single one would be too slow and inefficient if they really want this planet."

"But much more *clever*," Kirk said. "If they'd armed them with Klingon lasers or even repeating rifles, it would be obvious they'd interfered here." He spoke to Tyree. "Can you get us to their main village while it's still dark?"

Tyree hesitated. "The gumatos travel at night also. If you killed one, its mate will not leave."

Kirk laid his phaser on the table. "You've seen these work. So long as no one else sees them used—"

Nona stepped forward into the light of their pitch torch. "I also have seen them used."

Kirk swiftly replaced his phaser. Nona had turned to McCoy. "I saw you heat those stones with yours." Her eyes sought Kirk's. "And I know you have many ways to make Tyree a man of great importance."

McCoy eyed her. "Many ways?" He spoke to Tyree. "What else does she know about us?"

"Tyree has told me much of you." She smiled at Kirk. "Do not blame him. It was the price for saving your life."

McCoy slammed the table. "Demonstrating the wisdom of Starfleet orders!" he cried. "First, there's contact made… then a mistake, an accident. It has to be set right by a small intervention with natural evolution. The correction goes wrong—and more intervention is necessary…"

Kirk had reddened with anger. "*Thank you*, Doctor!" He spoke to Nona. "We are simply strangers from—"

"From one of the lights in the sky!" She nodded. "I know. And you have ways as far above firesticks as the sky is above our world!"

Tyree half-rose to his feet. "You will not speak of that to others!"

She ignored him to address Kirk. "I will not if I am made to understand. Teach me." She paused. "There's an old custom among my people. When a woman saves a man's life, he is grateful."

McCoy, eyes narrowed, watched Kirk. He waited—and Kirk said, "I am grateful."

"Highly commendable," McCoy said dryly. "If not carried to extremes."

But Kirk was waving Nona to a seat. It was clear that he was making a conscious effort to choose words cautiously. "We were once as you are, Nona. Spears and arrows. Then came the time when our weapons grew faster than our wisdom. We almost killed ourselves. So we made a rule. It said that we must never cause the same thing to happen to other worlds we visited. Do you understand?"

She didn't answer. Kirk laid a hand on Tyree's arm. "As a man must grow in his own way and in his own time, so must worlds. They—"

She interrupted. “Some men never grow.”

“Perhaps not as fast or in the way another thinks he should. But we are now wise enough to know how unwise it is to interfere with the way of another man or another world.”

“You will let the villagers destroy us? You will not help your friend and brother to kill them instead?”

Tyree sprang to his feet. “I have said I will not kill, woman! There are better ways!”

Her eyes flashed dark fire. “We must fight or die! Is dying better?” She whirled to Kirk. “You would let him die when you have weapons to make him powerful and safe? Then he has the wrong friends—and I have the wrong man!” She rushed from the hut.

Tyree made no move to follow her. After an awkward pause, he said, “You will help in ways she does not understand. I have faith in our friendship, friend. Come—or we lose the darkness.”

As he left, McCoy saw the pained look on Kirk’s face. “What’s bothering you? If we find the Klingons have armed the villagers, we can certainly do something about that.”

Kirk rose. “That’s what bothers me—the ‘something’ we may have to do.”

They found Tyree waiting at the camp’s edge. Despite the night, he was unhesitating as he led them along the trail winding downward to the village. The trees thinned—and he lifted a warning finger. A guard, flintlock at shoulder, was pacing his rounds on the village outskirts. The three came to a halt behind the bole of a massive tree.

“We’ll wait for the guard to circle back.” Kirk leaned back against the tree. “You have quite a wife, Tyree. Beautiful and intelligent.”

Tyree gave him a quick look; and seeing the sincerity in his face, nodded. “A *Kahn-ut-tu* woman is always a prize. They have… ways of making a man happy.”

“I remember the stories about them.”

“But mine talks too much of killing.”

“An ambitious woman is a treasure,” McCoy said. “Or a time bomb.”

Kirk spoke slowly. “Tyree, suppose… you *had* to fight? Suppose it were the only way?”

“Jim! This man believes the very thing we believe—killing is useless and stupid! What kind of question is that?”

Again Kirk was abruptly aware of loneliness—the loneliness of the immense responsibility he had chosen to undertake. Well, he'd taken it. For better or worse, it had to be borne now. He was in this thing up to his neck. He straightened. The guard was returning. He slid away from the tree bole to slip through the night, weaving his way from shadow to shadow. When the guard was within a foot of him, he downed him with a karate chop. Then, seizing the gun, he passed it to Tyree, saying, "Keep this. Wait for us."

The village's buildings were more sophisticated than the simple constructions of Tyree's camp. Some were lighted. Kirk and McCoy, keeping to shadows, saw a man approaching one of the larger ones. What they could glimpse of his thinly bearded face seemed to be that of some scholarly ascetic; but in the light of the opening door, it showed up crafty, even malignant. Circling the house, they found a window; and huddled under it, watched him cross a room to a map-covered table. Sitting at it, a new flintlock beside him, was another man, his back turned to them. But Kirk didn't have to see the cruel, lipless Klingon face. He had recognized the tailored metallic Klingon dress. And a Klingon weapon hung at its belt.

"You are late, Apella," the Klingon said.

"A quarrel to be judged. The division of some skins and a woman taken this morning. It is hard to divide one woman, Krell."

"Give her to the man who killed the most Hillpeople. Then the others will see the profit in bravery." He passed the musket to Apella. "Your next improvement. Notice what we've done to the striker. See how it holds the priming powder more securely? Fewer misfires." Pushing his chair back, Krell got to his feet. "When I return, we'll give you other improvements. A rifled barrel—a means to shoot farther and straighter."

"They must have a workshop," Kirk whispered. "Let's go…"

It was McCoy who spotted the shed. It was a ram-shackle affair, set back from the street, but the black bulk heaped beside it was interesting. "Coal," McCoy said, "necessary for a forge. And those bags, they reek of sulfur, an ingredient of gunpowder. Thus, logically, my dear Captain, their workshop."

"Thank you, Mr Spock." Kirk's face suddenly sobered. "Sorry. I know you're worrying about him, too."

"About that walking computer? Yes, I am."

The lock on the shed's door was as dilapidated as the building. Embers had been left to flicker in the still-open forge. Scattered around it were wooden gunstocks, bullet molds, iron rods to be bored into weapon barrels. McCoy's tricorder hummed over the

ingots; but Kirk had moved to a barrel-boring device. He tested its point with a piece of iron. To his surprise it clicked sharply. He unscrewed it. "People's exhibit number one," he said. "A chrome-steel drill point."

McCoy looked up. "This pig iron is almost carbon-free. No village furnace produced this." His tricorder passed over a barrel rod. "People's exhibit number two. Cold rolled barrel rods, fashioned to *look* handmade." He turned. "My apologies, Jim. You were right about the Klingons."

"Make recorder and scanner tapes on everything."

"Pity we can't include a Klingon. That would about wrap it—" He stopped. Footsteps and voices were nearing the shed door. They scrambled for concealment behind a dusty pile of cinders.

Krell entered, followed by Apella. He hung the village lantern he carried high on a hook. Behind the protective cinders, Kirk motioned to McCoy. Understanding, McCoy unlimbered his tricorder; and as Apella broke into speech, recorded the words. "I thought my people would grow tired of killing. But you were right, Krell. They see it is easier than trading. And it has pleasures. I feel them myself. Like the hunt, but with richer rewards."

The Klingon had lifted a rifle from the work bench. "You'll be rich beyond your dreams one day, Apella. A governor in our Klingon Empire. Unimaginable delights—" He paused, hearing the tiny hum of McCoy's scanner. He turned to look around him—and Kirk grabbed at a wooden gunstock. He flung it hard at the lantern. Sparks showered as its light went out. In the dimness Kirk leaped at Krell but the Klingon pivoted, catching Kirk on the shoulder with the rifle. McCoy, rushing forward, used the "exhibit" barrel to drop Apella and whirled to help Kirk. But Krell had tripped over an iron rod. His rifle went off—and he shouted, "Guards! Intruders! The work shed, intrud—"

Kirk's fist got him straight on the chin. He fell—but already the *Enterprise* men could hear running footsteps, yells, alarm shots. They made for the door. An armed villager, gun aimed, stood in it. Kirk, diving for his legs, tumbled him over the sill. Behind him Apella was up again; and again McCoy smashed down with the "exhibit" gunbarrel. They raced for the open door. Then they veered, making for the shadow behind the heaped coal. Armed villagers, converging on the shed, pelted past them. They waited. Then they broke from their shelter and fled. When the first bullet whined past them, they had rejoined Tyree.

Spock was no longer motionless. He had begun to writhe, his face distorted—and the body-functions panel's readings fluctuated

madly. When a groan burst from his laboring chest, Christine Chapel rushed to the wall intercom.

"Doctor M'Benga to Sickbay."

"Nurse… nurse…"

She flew to the bed. Spock's eyes were open, glaring wildly as he tried to control his twisting body. Twice he struggled again to speak and failed. The third time, his trembling lips succeeded in forming words. "Quickly… strike me. Pain will… help me… to consciousness. Strike me!"

Christine shrank back. "Hit you? No,—"

"Strike me!" He was gasping for air. "Unless… I return to… normal consciousness quickly… it will be too late…"

She hit him.

"Harder…"

She slapped him harder. His breathing improved and his voice more certain. "Again! Then again. Pain… helps me back… to consciousness."

She struck him once more. As she hauled off for the fourth time, Sickbay's door snapped open. Scott stood in it, jaw dropped as she landed the blow on the bedridden Spock. He leaped across the room, grabbing her arm. "*What are you doing, woman?*"

M'Benga came through the open door. He strode to the bed, pushing Scott and Christine aside. Then he struck Spock with all his strength. He struck him again and again. The flabbergasted Scott was staring in horror. It was clear that the entire medical staff had gone out of its mind.

But Spock was sitting up. "Thank you, Doctor. That will be sufficient."

M'Benga spoke to Scott. "You can release her, Mr Scott. She was only doing what she should have done." He gestured to the body-functions panel, whose needles were steadying into positions normal for Spock.

"A Vulcan form of self-healing, Engineer," Spock said.

He now astounded all but M'Benga by swinging his legs to the floor. As he made to stand, Christine moved an instinctive hand toward his arm. He congealed her with one of his arched-brow looks. "I am quite recovered, Nurse," he told her coolly.

She took the cool line herself. "Yes, I see you are, Mr Spock."

The Doctor who had interned in a Vulcan ward herded everyone out of Sickbay. As the door snapped shut behind the three, Spock began knee bends.

Tyree was not an enthusiastic student of armaments. He listened courteously while Kirk explained the eccentricities of the flintlock taken from the guard the night before; but it was clear that connections between stokers, sparks and the ignitions of gunpowder failed to arouse the martial spirit in him. Kirk placed the gun against his shoulder. "Now aim it as I showed you," he said.

McCoy, emerging from the cave, frowned at what he saw. The gun fired obediently; but the bullet, kicking up dust near the skin target, ricochetted away.

Tyree dropped the gun. Kirk gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder. "Very good," he said. But he had seen McCoy's look. "Not here, Bones. We'll talk in the cave."

Tight-lipped and angry, McCoy followed him into the cave. Kirk had the look of a man who has considered all alternatives, arrived at an unpleasant decision and intends to back it up.

They hunkered down on the cave floor and McCoy burst out. "Do I have to say it? It's not bad enough there's already a serpent in this Eden of yours teaching some of these people about gunpowder. You're going to make sure they *all* know about it!"

Kirk's voice was quiet. "Exactly. Both sides must receive the same knowledge, the same type of firearms…"

"Have you gone out of your mind? Yes, maybe that's it. Tyree's wife. There was something in that root she used. She said that now you could refuse her nothing."

"Nonsense! Believe me, Bones, I've *agonized* over this, thought it through most carefully."

"Is it a coincidence that this is exactly what she wants? I wonder…"

"She wants *superior* weapons. And that's the very thing neither side can have. Bones, listen. The normal development of this planet was status quo between the villagers and the Hillpeople. The Klingons changed that with the flintlocks. If this planet is to continue to develop as it should, we must equalize the two sides again—and *keep* them equal."

McCoy stared at Kirk in unbelief. "Jim—that condemns this whole planet to a war that may never end. You'll breed battle after battle, massacre after massacre…"

Kirk slammed his fist on the ground. "*All right, Doctor!* I've heard…" He got up as though movement might somehow move

him out of this ugliness. It didn't. But he'd got himself under control. He turned back. "Let's say I'm wrong. Even say the woman drugged me. So let's hear your sober, sensible solution to all this."

"We could collect all the firearms. Unfortunately, we can't collect the knowledge they've been given."

"No."

"Suppose we gave Tyree some weapon of overpowering force, something that would quickly frighten the villagers away." McCoy hesitated. "Trouble is, we've no guarantee what power of that kind might do even to Tyree."

Kirk waited. Finally he said, "Remember the twentieth century—the brush wars on the Asian continent? Two giant powers involved, much like the Klingons and ourselves. Neither felt they could pull out…"

"I remember. It went on bloody year after bloody year."

"What would you have suggested, Bones? That one side arm *its* friends with an overpowering weapon? Mankind would never have lived to travel space if that had been done!" Kirk got up to pace the length of the cave. "We can't take this planet back to where it was! The only solution is what happened then—a balance of power. If it can be kept in balance long enough…"

"But if the Klingons give the villagers more power, what then, Jim?"

"We give this side exactly that much more. The trickiest, most difficult, dirtiest game of them all—but the only one that preserves both sides. In whatever this planet is to become, each side has its evolutionary value."

McCoy's face had grown deeply thoughtful. "Jim, all this time… with Tyree blindly trusting you—and you beginning to understand what you'd have to do…"

Kirk nodded. "Agony, Doctor. I've never had a more difficult decision."

McCoy looked at him, himself experiencing Kirk's torment. "There's another morsel of agony for you. As Tyree won't fight, he'll be one of the first to die."

"He'd be a wise leader," Kirk said. He stopped his pacing. "His wife's the only way to reach him. If I tell her we'll supply guns, she may persuade him. I must have a talk with her."

She was bathing in a forest pool. Cooled and refreshed, she finally "stepped out of it, her wet inner garment clinging to her body. There was a flat rock near the pool and she sank down on it, zestfully savoring the sun's warmth as it began to dry her streaming black hair. After a moment she reached for her small leather pouch. Selecting a small herb from it, she crushed it between her hands, applying its scent to her neck, face and shoulders. She wore the concentrated look of a woman preparing herself for a man.

When she heard Kirk's voice call her name, she smiled to herself, unsurprised. Discarding the herb, she gave her attention to arranging her slim body advantageously.

At the sight of her in her thin wet clothing, Kirk hesitated. She beckoned to him. "Stay," she said. "You are here because I wished you here."

He smiled, correcting her. "I'm afraid this was *my* idea."

"Yes, they always believe they come of free will. Tyree thought the same when I cast my first spell on him." She touched the stone beside her invitingly. "Be comfortable, Kirk. Sit down. I will not hurt you."

After another moment of hesitation, he obeyed. She leaned toward him. "Can you smell the fragrance on me? Some find it pleasing."

He took a fast sniff at her shoulder. "Yes, very nice," he said. "But what I want… want to talk of…" The polite smile on his lips faded. His head was spinning.

Nona edged closer to him. He tried to draw back but his befuddled senses were stronger than his will.

"Smell the scent again," she said. "You will find it soothing."

"Yes, but I came to… to talk about… about…"

From where he had been following Kirk, Tyree heard the voices. He carried the flintlock whose mechanism still puzzled him. Now he forgot the question he had planned to ask. Face set, he checked the amount of powder in the pan. Then he moved on in the direction of the voices.

Nona had drawn Kirk close to the herb perfume on her neck. Kirk pulled away. Fighting vertigo, he got shakily to his feet, inhaling deep gulps of fresh air. "Forgive me… I… seem… unable to think…"

She sat very still, smiling and waiting. Kirk's eyes locked with hers. And suddenly he was smiling back, aware only of a lovely woman who seemed to desire him.

"How beautiful!" he said. "How lovely you are, Nona!"

Tyree raised the gun. For a moment he focused its sights on Nona. Then he swung them slowly to Kirk. Nona, in Kirk's embrace, caught the gleam of sun on the barrel. She made no move though Kirk's back was Tyree's clear target. There came the sound of the weapon's crash on a rock. Relief mixed with contempt in her face. Tyree could never be important. A man of faint heart. She lifted her arms to Kirk's neck.

"Yes, lovely… incredibly lovely," Kirk was saying foggily.

Tyree was running from the scene of his betrayal. As he skirted a rock, a monstrous shadow rose from behind it. The dead gumato's female mate, it had begun its swift and noiseless stalk of the Hillman when it was distracted by the sound of Kirk's maunderings. It swerved. Nona saw it over Kirk's shoulder. She tried to pull free but he held her tight. Fists clenched, she struck at him savagely, jerked clear of his arms and sped into a run. Then the sudden thought of Kirk's dazed helplessness halted her. Her quick stop brought a snarl from the beast. She screamed, racing for the pool. But the apelike thing cut her off at the water's edge. She shrieked again; and Kirk, slowly emerging from his confusion, fumbled for his phaser. Realization hit him. Rushing to the pool, he saw Nona prone, the great animal towering over her. He fired his phaser. The gumato vanished. Extending a hand, he helped Nona to her feet.

The assistance exhausted his strength. His drugged state had left him so weakened that he slumped to the ground, eyes closed, breathing hard. Nona looked down at him. Then she picked up a rock. She clubbed him over the head with it. The phaser dropped from his hand. She lifted it, examining it in wonder. Then she turned and made for the forest.

Stumbling, broken, Tyree was making his way to his lean-to when McCoy and Yutan intercepted him.

"Where's Captain Kirk?" McCoy demanded.

Tyree waved blindly behind him and Yutan cried, "Tyree! The firestick! Where is it?"

"I left it… back there."

"A fine thing to leave lying around! Show us!" McCoy shook Tyree's arm.

It roused him. "I show you," he said.

Pieces of the broken rifle lay on the ground. Yutan picked up the barrel. Tyree covered his face with his hands. "No! I don't want to see it!"

McCoy was about to speak when Kirk staggered toward them. Still groggy from the blow, he swayed. Then he crumpled back to the ground. McCoy, taking a quick check of his pulse, broke out the hypo from his medikit.

Meanwhile, Nona had arrived at a decision. At first sight of an armed village patrol, she had hidden herself behind a thick-leaved bush. As it approached, she made up her mind. She stepped from her concealment, confronting the leader of the four-man group. She lifted Kirk's phaser full into his view.

"I bring victory to Apella!" she said. "He will have the courage to use this new weapon! Take me to him!"

The man grinned. "Tyree's woman! A *Kahn-ut-tu* female also. Do we entrust this division to Apella?"

The patrolmen guffawed. The leader grabbed her, the others pressing around them. She yanked free. Then she aimed the phaser at the leader. "Touch me again—and this small box will kill you!"

The man hesitated. But the villager behind her gave her a slight push. She wheeled to level the weapon at him. He was not impressed. All of them were grinning broadly now. They closed in about her, clutching at her, at her clothing. Ignorant of how to use the phaser, she tried to shove them away. "Fools!" she cried. "I bring you a weapon far greater than your firesticks!" Laughing, one of the men pushed her at another one. She struck out, screaming. They began to toy with her. Their laughter had acquired a dangerous edge. One of them tried to kiss her. She shrieked again.

Kirk heard her. He reached for his phaser. "Nona! She's taken my phaser! She's in trouble! Come on…"

There was another scream. Her thin garment was ripped now. Passed roughly from jeering man to jeering man, she beat at their faces with the phaser, screaming wildly.

Kirk, McCoy and the two Hillmen raced down a hill toward her. The patrol leader, looking up, saw them. "Men," he yelled, "it's a trap! The woman tricked us!" His sharp knife gleamed. He struck.

"Nona!" Tyree shouted.

The leader lifted his flintlock, aimed and fired. McCoy fell.

Kirk, Tyree and Yutan charged the patrol. The fight was hand to hand, bloody and brief. The two surviving villagers fled. McCoy, holding his wounded arm, stumbled down to the scene of the melee. Tyree was stooped over the dead body of his wife. In the dirt, trampled but undamaged, lay the phaser. Kirk picked it up.

"She gave it to them," McCoy said. "But they didn't recognize it."

Kirk looked at the wounded arm. "You, too," he said.

"Yes, me too! You and your blasted Paradise planet!"

Tyree had straightened. He reached for an abandoned flintlock. Then he removed the powder and bullet pouch from a patrolman's dead body. He turned to Kirk, his grim face working with grief and fury. He extended the gun toward Kirk.

"I want more of these! Many more!"

"You'll have them," Kirk said.

Tyree spoke to Yutan. "Two of those who killed my wife escaped. We shall track them down and kill them. Come! I must speak to our people."

They set off at a run. There was a moment's silence before McCoy said, "Well, you've got what you wanted."

"Not what I wanted, Bones. What had to be."

Amazingly, his communicator, so long silent, beeped. He flipped it open. "Kirk here."

"Spock, Captain. I trust all has gone well."

"Spock!" McCoy shouted. "Are you alive?"

"A ridiculous question, Doctor. Clearly you are hearing my voice."

McCoy shook his head. "I don't know why I was worried. You can't kill a computer."

Kirk motioned him to silence. "Spock, ask Scotty how long it will take to reproduce a hundred flintlocks."

Scott's voice spoke. "I didna get that precisely, sir. A hundred what?"

"A hundred… serpents, Scotty. Serpents for the Garden of Eden." He paused. "We're very tired, Mr Spock. Beam us up back home."

THE GAMESTERS OF TRISKELION

(Margaret Armen)

Gamma II was a planet so small it scarcely merited the name. Reportedly uninhabited, it nevertheless boasted automatic communications and astrogation installations. Making a routine check of these stations was Kirk's motive for ordering Uhura and Chekov to beam down with him to the surface.

At Chekov's announcement that the *Enterprise* was now circling Gamma II in standard orbit, Kirk nodded.

"Very good, Mr Chekov. Lieutenant Uhura?"

"Ready, sir."

"Then let's go." And turning to Spock, added, "Commander, you mind the store."

"Yes, Captain."

His Science Officer, moving swiftly to the vacated command chair, watched them enter the bridge elevator. From here on, he thought, it would be the old story—the Transporter room, the "Energize" command and then the sparkled glitter of their dematerialization.

But for once it was a new story. Though Kirk, Uhura and Chekov took their places on the platform, and despite Scott's push at his second switch, they did not shimmer out in the orthodox Transporter effect. One moment they were where they should be, and the next, they were simply and bafflingly gone.

The startled Scott jerked back his first switch. Then more alarmed than he cared to admit to himself, he gave himself to a frantic spinning of dials. If he'd hoped for their reappearance on the platform, there was none. Yet more alarmed, he hit his bridge communicator to say into it, "Scott to bridge."

"Spock here, Mr Scott."

"Mr Spock—the Captain, Lieutenant Uhura and Mr Chekov—they did not dematerialize. They just disappeared. They took their positions on the platform—and then they simply went. Where, sir?"

"I presume you mean in a manner inconsistent with the usual workings of the Transporter."

Under the pressure of his anxiety, Scott's blood pressure rose. "Of course I mean that! Do you think I'd call you if they had just beamed down?"

The tranquil voice said, "Have you reversed your controls, Mr Scott?"

"I've made all the proper checks. There was nothing—nothing. No light flashes… no outlinings of shimmer-out. Nothing. They're just gone, sir, and I can't bring them back."

"Power surges?

"Not from here, sir. The dials are right, and the Transporter functioned perfectly."

"Recheck your equipment, Mr Scott. I'll scan for them on the planet's surface."

Meanwhile, on that surface of Gamma II, the materialization of the *Enterprise* trio was as out of order as their departure from the Starship. Instead of duplicating the erect positions they had assumed on the Transporter platform, they fell flat on their faces until, in an uncontrollable roll, they were brought up against the foot of a jagged rock formation towering steep to a red and greenish sky. Kirk was the first to regain his feet. Dizzy, shaking his head against the vertigo, he half-realized that they had landed in a most peculiar place—a paved area marked by random lines that delineated triangles, rectangles, hexagons, rhomboids—a hodgepodge of every conceivable geometrical design.

Chekov, stirring, struggled up, staring around him. No rhetorician, he said, "What happened, sir?"

"Must have been a Transporter malfunction."

"A rough trip, Captain."

Going to the still prone Uhura, Kirk pulled her to her feet. Puzzledly.

"This isn't Gamma II," he told them. "Look at the colour of that sky."

Clutching his arm for support, Uhura said, "This is the craziest landing pad I've ever seen."

She spoke truth. It *was* a mad landing pad: an area about the size of a tennis court but otherwise bearing no resemblance to one. There was no coherent pattern whatever to the conglomeration of demented geometry around them. Helter-skelter to no obvious point, it proliferated itself meaninglessly.

However, a closer scrutiny of it suggested that they were standing in what could only have been a playing board created by lunatics for some equally lunatic game.

Kirk, careful to shade his eyes, stared up again at the sinister sky.

"That's a trinary sun up there," he said.

"Then you're right, sir, and we're not on Gamma II," Chekov said. "And if we're not, where are we?"

Kirk managed a wry grin; "I'd like to know that answer too, Mr Chekov." And unbelted his communicator, flipped it open to say, "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

But intuition had already warned him that the Starship would fail to respond. Nor would the communicators of the others function.

"Dead, sir," Chekov said unnecessarily.

He was rebelting his device when Uhura, pointing to the cliff base, whispered an urgent, "Captain!"

Following the line of her outstretched forefinger, Kirk said, "No, this is not Gamma II. That's an uninhabited planetoid. This one clearly is. We appear to have company, friends."

Close under the shadow of the escarpment, four creatures were standing, observant and intrigued by the strangers' appearance, but their postures hostile, alert. Outstanding in physique was a huge blond male, a Viking who might have been resurrected from some Norse saga's Valhalla. Beside him, squat but thickly muscled as an ape, was Neanderthal Man himself, his low brow shock-haired almost to the nose. And next to him was a female whom some unknown deity had endowed with a bush of yellowish, black-spotted hair, leopardlike. Two fangs protruding from her upper teeth hung over her lower lip. The fangs were pointed.

But the fourth being was the true astonishment—a gorgeous Amazon of a bronze-haired girl, the sapphire of her dark-lashed eyes flashing with the general hostility. But like the rest of her companions, she wore a metallic collar around her lovely neck, inset with some glittering gem under the ear.

Both women carried daggers in the clumsy belts that confined their smockish coarse garments at the waist. Moreover, they had additional weapons, the males equipped with staves ending in blades at one end and grapples at the other.

Wordlessly, the alien group moved forward until they had spaced themselves evenly around the triangle enclosing Kirk, Chekov and Uhura.

The giant Viking finally spoke.

"I am Lars," he said. "He is Kloog. She of the beast's hair is Tamoon. The other she is Shahna."

Fierce suspicion deepened the deep voice. Where usually Kirk would have met such an introduction with one of his own, he decided that this was no time for an exchange of courtesies. So, instead, he said quietly, "Phasers at stun." And added, "Just in case."

The case arose.

Lars, jaw set, stepped forward and, extending a formidable arm, attempted to wrench Chekov's phaser from him. Kirk promptly fired his. Nothing… nothing. And when he ordered phaser action from Chekov and Uhura, the nothing was repeated. Swiftly, the *Enterprise* Captain made an adjustment on his weapon and once more tried to activate it. It was as dead as the communicators. Then hurling the useless phaser at the still oncoming blond giant, he ducked sideways to get to the rear of his adversary. Behind him, he was aware that the other three aliens had already subdued Chekov and Uhura, and, with an heroic effort, controlled his ingrained sense of responsibility for them to leap on Lars's heavy-muscled back. He managed a neck chop. It stunned Lars. The giant didn't drop, but he stumbled, reeling, dazed, too shocked for instant reaction.

Seizing advantage of the temporary respite, Kirk added several other telling blows to the vulnerable join of neck to backbone. The last one doubled up the redoubtable Siegfried. And straightening in satisfaction, Kirk turned to his less fortunate shipmates.

It was the beautiful Shahna who had downed Uhura with Tamoon's assistance. But now she left the leopard-haired creature to guard Uhura in order to concentrate her own belligerent and very dangerous attention on Kirk.

His moment of self-satisfaction had been expensive. Too slowly he realized that Shahna was hurtling toward him, and. jumping back, was barely able to dodge the vicious slash of her spear. But the cliff wall blocked all further retreat. Shahna snatched the dagger from the belt that held her shoulder harness in place and, flying at him, pushed its point painfully against the skin of his throat. He looked away from the sapphire eyes so full of triumphant hate, saying to himself, "Okay. Maybe this is it."

To their rear, Tamoon and Kloog had jerked his two companions erect, and Lars rose slowly to his feet, still groggy from the neck chops. As to Kirk, he was now half-crouched against the cliff's rock face, immobilized lest the infuriated Shahna drive the dagger through to his backbone. He gasped, choking, and to his relieved

but immense surprise, the pressure eased slightly. Instantly, he came out of his crouch, and at the same moment, a new figure abruptly appeared in the center triangle.

"Hold!" it cried.

At once Shahna lowered her dagger. Ignoring her, the stranger spoke directly to Kirk. "Excellent, Captain Kirk!"

There'd been no excellence about it—just an instinctive use of Space Academy training. But there was no time for reminiscence on the stiff courses through which the Academy put its cadets, for the masterful newcomer was leaving the triangle for a closer approach to the *Enterprise* people. Was it his dress which conveyed the impression of undisputed authority? Perhaps. For he wore no smock but a togalike garment, its shoulder bearing a gold-embroidered emblem; nor did he carry any weapons. Yet the unarmed stranger also wore a gemmed, metallic collar under his expressionless features, a face Kirk judged to be in its middle thirties.

He spoke again.

"Although we expected strength and competitive spirit, Captain Kirk, we are greatly pleased."

Kirk was silent, too angry to trust himself to speak. Kloog was dragging a squirming Chekov toward them, followed by Lars who clutched a struggling, kicking Uhura over his big shoulder. Thrust into positions near Kirk, their two captors divested them of phasers, tricorders and communicators.

Kirk spoke to his people. "Either of you hurt?"

The shaken Uhura shook her head. "I—I don't think so, sir." But the wildly furious Chekov yelled, "No, nobody's hurt—*yet*, Captain!"

"Admirable, Chekov," observed the black-robed man. "Admirable! You also, Uhura. I can see you will all prove invaluable here."

Once more Chekov yelled. "Who is he, sir?"

"I am Galt," he was told. "I am the Master Thrall of the planet Triskelion. I have been sent to welcome you."

A highly undesirable welcome. Even as Galt was speaking, Kirk felt unseen hands at his neck as they fitted one of the jeweled collars around it. He pushed at them, but they were intangible; nor would any exertion budge the lock. He accepted the inevitable, trying to relax until he saw that the same invisible fingers had attached the collar to a chain they affixed to the rock wall. To his right, and visibly, Shahna, Lars and Tamoon were busy shackling his crewmates to chained collars.

"Now," Galt said, "you are prepared for your training."

For the first time Kirk addressed him. "How do you know our names?"

"The Providers were expecting you, Captain. They arranged your… transfer here."

So it had not been a Transporter malfunction that had sent them tumbling onto the wrong planet. Their arrival was the consequence of interference, an interference as powerful as it was inexplicable.

He waited a moment before he said, "These Providers of yours. Are they—?"

Gait's interruption was sharp. "Correction, Captain! The Providers are not ours. We are *theirs*."

A slave state.

"And what do the Providers want with us?"

"You are to be trained, of course. What other use is there for Thralls?"

"Thralls? I think there's been a mistake. We're officers of a United Space Ship bound on Federation business."

"There's been no mistake. Your old titles mean nothing here. You are Thralls now. And to be taken to the training enclosure. Come, places have already been prepared for you."

"We will do nothing until we get a satisfactory explanation of this outrage. Who are you? What is this place? And what do you think you're going to do with us?"

"I have told you. This place is the planet Triskelion. You will be trained and spend the rest of your lives here. Don't trouble yourself with thoughts of escape. It is impossible. No Thrall leaves Triskelion. Lars, unchain them from the rock."

As the heavy links were removed, Galt added, "Now you are able to accompany me to your quarters." He hesitated. Then, persuasively, he said, "Captain, no harm is intended you."

Kirk looked at the four subservient Thralls as they marshaled Chekov and Uhura before them. Then, shrugging, he followed their Master's lead.

McCoy, on the *Enterprise* bridge, had joined Spock at his scanner, noting that an Ensign Jana Haines had been assigned to the absent Chekov's console, another junior officer at Uhura's position. Scott, emerging from the elevator, stalked over to the two at the scanner.

"Mr Spock, I've checked the Transporter from one end to the other. Every circuit is perfect. Whatever that power surge was, it didn't come from the Transporter or any other system on this ship!"

"I'm beginning to believe that, Mr Scott. I have conducted two sweeps of the planet's surface. There is no sign of life."

McCoy reddened. "Well, what the devil's happened then? Does that mean that their atoms are still floating around out there?"

"No, Doctor. Even that would show up on the sensors."

"Then where are they?" Scott shouted.

Mild as ever, Spock said, "The only answers are negative, Mr Scott. No magnetic storms, no ionic interference and, as you say, no breakdown in your equipment."

It was McCoy's turn to shout. "A negative attitude isn't much good to us, Spock! We just can't leave them out there—" He broke off to add a desperate "—wherever they are."

"We shall continue sensor scans, Doctor. At the moment, that is all we can do except hope for a rational explanation."

"Hope!" McCoy jeered. "I thought that was a strictly human failing. Vulcans don't indulge it!"

"Prolonged exposure to the failing results in a certain amount of contamination, Doctor." And turning away, Spock resumed operation of his scanner.

A corridor giving on to a row of box stalls was the destination of the *Enterprise* captives. Box stalls, their doors centrally cut, the upper half barred, the lower one locked. Herded down the corridor, they were halted before three stalls, staring in unbelief at the nameplates fastened to the doors. They read: *Kirk, Chekov, Uhura*.

Kirk had been up against such assured, though alien, intelligence on his mission "to go where no man had gone before." For a long moment, he was astounded by this Triskelion variety. Then, once again, he shrugged. Now there could be no answer to the arrogant certainty of the beings Galt called "The Providers." But tomorrow was another day. And Spock on the *Enterprise* would be overworking his own not inconsiderable intelligence to apply his equally efficient equipment to discovery of the answer.

Beside him, Galt said, "These are your quarters. Open, Shahna."

Obediently, she removed a small disk from her harness, placing it on the three locks of the cells. While she was working on the

third, Kirk shot Chekov a quick, significant look to which his navigator nodded.

The three doors open, Galt said, "Enter."

Kirk and Chekov took two apparently compliant steps only to whirl, whirl and lunge at their nearest jailer. Kirk struck Kloog in the midriff with all the power of his powerful shoulders, knocking Neanderthal Man to his knees. Then, in his command voice, he shouted, "Lieutenant Uhura!"

She gathered herself, and, shoving Tamoon who was flanking her, sent the fanged one spinning against Lars. Then running to Kirk, he, she and Chekov raced down the corridor to the still open entrance.

Lacking eyes in the back of their heads, they couldn't see Galt close his, his face deeply concentrated. But they could feel the results. Suddenly, the jewels in their slave collars went into a sickening, greenish glow. The race ended as the collars tightened, their faces contorted in agony as the anguished choking continued, driving them to their knees, hands futilely clutching at the strangling collars. They sank down, unaware that Galt was watching them with clinical detachment. Unaware of anything but pain, they failed to see that Galt had once more shut his cold eyes in concentration.

As Kirk collapsed on his back, the veins of his neck protruding, the jewel on his collar winked out. But it had done its work. Eons seemed to pass before his tortured throat could swallow and breath returned to his lungs. Then yet more eons crept by before he could get to his knees and, using his weakened arms, thrust himself up to his feet. Chekov and Uhura, watching him, used his method to recover theirs.

"That was foolish, Captain," said Galt. "I warned you that escape is impossible. The collars of obedience have proved that to you."

He nodded toward Kirk's cell. Kirk, hesitating, recognized the futility of defiance and entered it. As his friends followed his example, the cell doors were slammed shut.

It was bad news from Spock. Straightening from his scanner, he said, "They are not within the confines of this solar system, Doctor."

"It's been nearly an hour. Can people live that long as disassembled atoms in a Transporter beam?"

"I've never heard of a study being done. But it would be a fascinating research."

"Fascinating! Those are our friends out there! If they're still alive, that is."

"Precisely."

"The odds aren't good, Spock."

"No. I should say they are—"

"Don't quote odds. And don't give me anymore of your dispassionate logic. Just find them. Keep looking."'

"I would welcome a suggestion—even an emotional one—as to where to look."

"The first time you've ever asked me for anything, and it has to be an occasion like this!"

Chekov, supporting himself against the bars of his cell, spoke to Kirk in the next one. "Captain, the *Enterprise*—they'll be trying to find us, won't they?"

Uhura, her voice hopeless, answered him. "They'll be trying. But where do they look? We're here and we don't know where it is."

"This system's star is a trinary," Kirk said. "And that limits it a bit. However, we're a long way from the *Enterprise*—if we're even in the same dimension."

Before the others could reply, Lars came down the corridor to stop before Uhura's door. "I am your Drill Thrall," he announced. "You may call me Lars."

As he spoke, Kirk saw him insert a rod into the catching hole in her cage.

"What do you want with her?" he said.

"That is not your concern. Your Drill Thrall will attend you presently." Then through the opened door, he pushed a covered receptacle at her. "Here is nourishment. Consume it quickly. The time is limited."

Uhura, at the look in his eyes, drew back. "What—what do you want?"

He was eyeing her brunette beauty with increasing appreciation. "I have been selected for you."

Then walking into her sparsely furnished cubicle, he closed its door. But though the uneasy Uhura backed away from him, he maintained his confident, slow approach to her, a suggestive grin

exposing his strong, white teeth. When he reached out a huge hand to caress her neck, she kicked him, but he seized the leg and, pushing her down to the cell floor, muttered, "Stop it. I told you, you are mine."

She bit his lip.

At the sounds from her stall, Kirk and Chekov peered anxiously through their bars, Kirk calling, "Uhura! Uhura, can you hear me?" But the noise of struggle went on. "*Lieutenant Uhura! Answer me!*"

The only answer was the sound of a blow. Alarmed, frustrated, Kirk shouted again, his face pressed against his bars. Then his own cell door opened to Shahna outside it, unarmed now and carrying another covered container of food.

Kirk grabbed it, threw it to the floor, glaring at the girl.

"What's happening to Lieutenant Uhura?" he yelled.

She made no reply, and in the silence came a final resounding crash from Uhura's stall. Desperate, Kirk called again. "Uhura! Are you all right?"

Lars provided the reassurance. Backing out of the stall and wiping blood from his bitten lip, he staggered as he protested plaintively, "It is not allowed to refuse selection. It is not allowed."

He moved away down the corridor, confused by such unexpected resistance; and Uhura, breathless, disheveled, spoke from her cell door.

"Yes, sir," she said. "I'm fine. He's big—but he's stupid."

Chekov, embarrassed by his concern for her, whispered, "Lieutenant, what happened?"

Uhura's hearing was as keen as her physical fitness. Shooting him an irritated look, she said, "*Nothing!* You're stupid too!"

Half-smiling, Kirk turned to see Shahna stooping, her russet hair a tumble of curls on her lovely head, busily restoring the scattered dishes of his food container to their places in it. Then setting it on a cubed stand, she said, "Come. It is the Nourishment Interval."

On the *Enterprise* bridge, Ensign Haines had left Chekov's position for Spock's computer console. She studied it intently before straightening to address Spock in the command chair.

"Sir, I get a fluctuating energy reading from this hydrogen cloud."

With Scott and McCoy, he went to her to replace her at the scanner.

"It's faint, sir," she said, "but it consistently reads in excess of predictable energy levels." Spock adjusted several dials before he spoke. "There seems to be an ionization trail. Most interesting." And rapidly punched another computer key.

"What would account for that?" McCoy asked.

"The very question I have just fed into the computer, Doctor." And after a moment, added, "The answer is, nothing is known to us to account for it."

Scott rose to the defense of his Transporter. "It lacks both the power and the range to be responsible for it."

"Plot a follow course, Ensign Haines," Spock ordered.

"Aye, sir." And returning to her navigation console, swung switches before she said, "Course plotted, Mr Spock. 310 Mark 241."

"Now lay in the course, Ensign Haines."

McCoy's voice rose in anger. "You're going to leave here without them and go off on some wild-goose chase halfway across the galaxy just because you found a discrepancy in a hydrogen cloud? Spock, where's your head? They've been gone for more than two hours!"

Spock, eyes on his scanner, said, "I am pursuing the Captain, Lieutenant Uhura and Ensign Chekov, Doctor, not an aquatic fowl. This is the only lead we have had."

"Course laid in, Mr Spock," Ensign Haines reported.

"Initiate," he told her. "Warp Factor Two."

All eyes, including his, swerved to the main viewing screen.

Chekov was having his troubles too. He had backed nervously toward a bench in his stall as the fanged Tamoon opened its door, carrying his covered container of food. For to his horror, he had read covetous admiration in the slanting yellow eyes of the leopard-haired woman.

Stammering, he managed to ask, "You—you have been selected for me?"

She uttered a sad little whine. "No. I am only your Drill Thrall. I have brought you nourishment." And placing the container on the bench near him, made an obvious attempt to sound seductive. "It is a nice name—Chee-koo."

"Chekov," he said.

Though the fangs prohibited clear enunciation, she tried, speaking slowly and carefully. "Chee-koof." And beaming happily at him, said, "It is a *very* nice name—so nice you may call me Tamoon."

Chekov ran a cold hand down his face. "Pleased—pleased to know you… uh… miss."

"You are a fine specimen. I like you better than the others."

Chekov had amply demonstrated his courage in confrontation with galactic foes, but the clumsy coquetry of this alien female terrified him. When she said, "I will instruct you well so my Provider will take you," he backed still farther away. "That's very nice of you, miss, but-"

He had reached the bench. It hit the back of his knees so that he sat down on it abruptly only to be followed by Tamoon who dropped down beside him, the fanged mouth opened in a coy smile.

"If my Provider is pleased, we may even be selected for each other."

A slight groan escaped him, and Tamoon, her hoarse voice sympathetic, said, "You are hungry, Chee-koof." And uncovering his dishes, added, "Eat, Chee-koof."

"Chekov," he said. "No, thank you, I am not hungry."

But Kirk was. As he wolfed the contents of his metal bowls, Shahna watched him approvingly. Finishing, he gave a satisfied sigh.

"Didn't realize I was so hungry. Whatever you call that, it was good."

"It is nourishment," she said. "We call it that." And gathering up the emptied bowls, replaced them neatly in their container, Kirk studying her contemplatively, very much aware of her slim beauty.

"Nourishment," he repeated. "Very practical. And what do you call this collar?"

The sapphire eyes stared at him. "It is the sign of our Provider. By the colour of the jewels, it can be known who holds us. When you are vended, you will also have a coloured jewel."

"Vended? You mean sold? Bought?"

Puzzled, she said, "When you are developed. The Provider who offers the most quatloos puts his colour on us."

Kirk nodded. "My race has another name for that—the word 'slavery.' "

Clearly the information meant nothing to her. As she covered the food container, he said, "The collar of obedience. Is Galt the only one who can operate it?"

"It is only to warn and punish."

"How does he make it work?"

She stared again. "It is not permitted to talk of that."

He pointed to the container she held. "Are you—will you bring me all my nourishment?"

"Of course. I am your Drill Thrall. I will train you well."

"I'm sure of that." And rising from his bench, he said, "I must say I've never seen a top sergeant who looked like you."

"I don't understand. What does that mean?"

Leaning back against the wall, he said, "It means that you're a very beautiful woman."

She rose from her stoop, shaking her head in bewilderment. "What is beautiful?"

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that before?"

"No. What is it?"

"It's hard to explain… a lot of things… it's—" Then lifting the shining metal cover from the container in her hands, he got up, and holding it close to her face, said, "Look into this. What you see is beautiful."

But her mirrored reflection seemed to merely increase her bafflement; and as her discomfort was genuine, Kirk, changing the subject, asked, "Where were you born, Shahna?"

"Born? I have been here always."

"Where are your parents? Your father and mother. Where are they?"

"She who bore me was killed in a free-style match."

"Free style!"

"Do not be anxious. You will learn all these things."

"And the others, Lars and the one who is Chekov's Drill Thrall, they weren't born here. Where did they come from?"

"It is not permitted—" and breaking off at the sudden shrill of a bell, immediately recovered her self-possession, all business again. "The exercise interval," she told him. And turning to a small cabinetlike projection in a corner, pressed a button on its door. A well-disguised panel slid aside; reaching past it, she removed a harness from it similar to the one she wore.

"This is your training harness. Put it on."

Spock, with Ensign Haines beside him, was working on his scanners, but the eyes of the other bridge people were fixed on the main viewing screen, their faces taut with anxiety.

McCoy moved impatiently. "This is ridiculous! There's nothing out there—nothing at all!"

Scott nodded his agreement. "We're certainly heading into an empty sector."

Spock looked up. "Projecting back along the path of ionization, the nearest system is M24 Alpha."

"But that must be two dozen light years from here!" Scott cried.

"Eleven point six three zero, Mr Scott."

"Spock, are you suggesting that they have been transported over a distance of—?" And sputtering in angry protest, said, "You're out of your Vulcan mind, Spock!"

"I am suggesting nothing, Doctor. I am following the only logical course available to us."

McCoy was not calmed but began to stride nervously around the bridge stations.

"This is the staff," Shahna said. "It can defend or attack."

It looked as though it could, its one end sharpened to a cutting edge, the other one hooked. Like Chekov and Uhura, Kirk said nothing, aware, however, that Lars and Tamoon were standing nearby on one of the gaming board shapes.

"I demonstrate," Shahna announced. "Lars."

As Lars moved toward her, holding a staff of his own, she spoke to the three strangers. "I shall attack. An attacker may use only the dark areas of the board, the defender only the light areas."

Positioned on the gaming board, the two instructors went through a brief show of quarterstaff technique, of expert lunging and pike work. Then Shahna said, "We stop now. Your Drill Thralls will begin your training."

"Hold!"

It was Galt's cold voice. By a means none of the *Enterprise* officers could detect, the Master Thrall had suddenly popped into the central triangle, another Thrall, hands manacled, beside him.

Galt was pleased to explain. "This one was slow to obey a command. For his punishment, he will be target Thrall." And

ignoring the shock on the trainees' faces, said, "You will charge from here, striking the target Thrall as you pass. Uhura, begin."

Staring at her victim in horror, Uhura dazedly accepted the staff Lars handed her. Then full realization flooding her, she cried, "No! No! No!"

Gait's face was glacial. "It is not allowed to refuse a training exercise. Begin!"

"I don't care whether it's allowed or not! I won't do it!" And, in a fury, Uhura threw down her staff.

Very quietly, Kirk said, "None of us will do it, Galt."

Sparkle came into Gait's eyes—a glitter that reminded Kirk of the shine of snow under sun. "It is part of your training. The Providers wish it."

"The devil with the Providers!" Kirk shouted, hearing Chekov beside him mutter, "Cossacks!"

There was a pregnant pause before Galt closed his eyes—and the gems on their slave collars began to glow. The agony forced them to their knees. Then the glow faded as Galt opened his eyes. And once more there was the struggle to recover their feet.

"We have been tolerant because you are newcomers," Galt said. '"But I see you must be taught a lesson." He clapped his hands sharply, and two other Thralls quickly strode from the sidelines, released their manacled fellow, all three moving away as Galt called, "Kloog!"

The hunched ape-man appeared, armed with a wide, hooked net, a dagger and a short whip. Crossing to the triangle, he faced Galt, waiting expectantly.

The *Enterprise* officers exchanged appalled glances, but the oblivious Galt merely said, "Kloog will administer correction. Uhura, take your place on that rectangle. Lars, tie her!"

She gave Kirk a frightened look and was starting forward when he swiftly interposed himself in front of her.

"I am responsible for the actions of my people! I demand to see the Providers!"

"That is not permitted."

Controlling the hot rage surging in him, Kirk said, "I know your Providers possess great power, but I assure you that it doesn't match the power of the entire Federation. There is a Starship searching for us now. If we're killed, you will invite the vengeance, not of one Starship, but a fleet of them."

"The Providers know of your Starfleet, Captain. And since you assume responsibility for your people, you will take the punishment." Galt smiled slightly. "If I may say so, you are rash, Captain. However, this punishment will be less painful than the collar. Turn around."

For a moment, Kirk hesitated. Then he obeyed, and Galt, still smiling, snapped manacles on him.

"You, Captain, will be target Thrall."

Well, he'd asked for it, so now he had it. Moving slowly but alertly onto the board, he paused a few feet from Kloog, half-crouched, watching the creature warily.

Galt spoke. "It's a shame to lose you, Captain. But it's worth it as an example to the others."

It was an example of insane brutality. Kloog, expert with the hooked net, lunged suddenly at the hand-bound Kirk who dodged the mesh just in time to avoid snare in it; but before he could recover himself, Kloog slashed him across the chest with his whip. Kirk, staggering backward, didn't hear Uhura's gasp of horror nor did he see Lars push back the onrushing Chekov with his spear. Fighting, he knew, for his life, he was totally concentrated on eluding the perilous net.

It lifted for another downsweep, and again Kirk ducked from under it, one of its hooks ripping his arm. Once more, whirling and crouching, the pattern of the unequal contest continued, Kirk circling, dodging as Kloog, bearing in on him, gave him not a moment's respite. He was sweating now, his legs shaking with exhaustion when Galt called, "Hold!"

Head sagging, Kirk heard him add, "Rest interval. Fifteen trisecs."

Kloog lowered his weapons, dropping down cross-legged on the floor while Kirk, staggering to a nearby bench, collapsed on it. Vaguely, he was aware that Shahna had appeared beside him, and had placed a slim-necked flagon to his lips.

"This will strengthen you. Drink it."

He swallowed ravenously, some of the liquid spilling down his cut chest. Gradually, as his breathing became normal, he said, "Thanks. He's pretty fast with that whip."

"It is the net you must watch. Once you are caught in it, he will use the dagger—to finish."

He nodded; and Shahna, giving a swift glance in Gait's direction, quickly whispered, "Kloog's left eye is weak. Approach him from that side."

Startled by this unexpected concern, Kirk watched her run back to her place on the sidelines; but there was no time for reflection on its meaning, for Galt had called, "Resume places!"

However, the watchful dodging and ducking had become more confident now. As Kloog, his net and whip retrieved, turned slowly to face him, Kirk darted abruptly to the right, reversed and angled in on his opponent's left. Kloog lashed out with the whip, connecting viciously with Kirk's cheek; but he, catching the thong with a foot, jerked it from him. The net rose high for the throw. Ready for it, Kirk flung himself to the floor and, rolling, sprang up to butt Kloog in the midriff with his head. Then, swiftly, he twisted away from the net, and kicking at Kloog with both feet, felled him.

A new voice, loud and shrill, cried, "Hold!"

All the Triskelions, Galt and the Thralls, knelt, their heads bowed humbly in the direction of a blank rear wall.

"We hold, Provider One," Galt said obsequiously.

Kirk joined Chekov and Uhura, the three trying to locate the owner of the voice when it spoke again. "Provider One bids three hundred quatloos for the newcomers."

A deeper voice cried, "Provider Two bids three hundred and fifty quatloos!"

Then another one chimed in, all the disembodied voices sounding from the various walls. "Provider Three, four hundred!"

Once more the *Enterprise* officers glanced vainly around to detect some other source for the mysterious voices, the walls alone confronting them.

"Provider Two bids one thousand quatloos!"

"Provider Three says one thousand and fifty quatloos!"

It was the turn of Provider One again. "Two thousand!"

Immediately the bidding quieted. And Galt, bowing deferentially, said, "Two thousand quatloos are bid. Is there another challenge?"

The walls remained silent; and after a pause, Galt made his announcement. "The newcomers have been vended to Provider One."

Kirk spoke sharply. "We are free people. We belong to no one!"

Provider Two was pleased to approve the statement. "Such spirit! I wager fifteen quatloos that he is untrainable!"

If Kirk was spirited, so was the competitiveness of the invisible Providers. "Twenty quatloos that all three are untrainable!"

"Wagers accepted," shrilled Provider One.

Whereupon bedlam burst out from the walls, the voices overwhelming each other in their excitement to register bets on their new Thralls' trainability. The sums of offered quatloos mounted wildly until the clamor was finally stilled by the shout, "Provider Three wagers five thousand quatloos that the newcomers will have to be destroyed!"

The high, effeminate voice of Provider One shrieked, "Accepted! Mark them, Galt!"

The gems on their collars went orange.

"You now bear the mark of a fine herd," Galt said. "But I must warn you. Now that you are full-fledged Thralls, any further disobedience will be punishable by death."

The bridge's unpromising viewing screen had raised Scott's anxiety to such a pitch that he couldn't contain it. Marching purposely over to Spock, he said, "Mr Spock, listen to me! It just doesn't make sense they could have come this far! If there's any chance at all, it's to continue to search the area where they were lost!"

Self-possessed, inscrutable, Spock said, "We searched that area, Mr Scott."

"It's always possible to miss something!"

"Such as a failure in the Transporter mechanism?"

"No, sir. There's no sign of any failure."

"And there was no sign of them in the area of Gamma II."

McCoy broke in. "And if they weren't there, it's just ridiculous to believe they could still be alive—not after all this time!"

"In that case, Doctor, we have nothing to lose in pursuing our present course."

Quarterstaff practice had begun on the gaming board, Lars attacking, Uhura defending. As they moved away to a rhomboid, Chekov, holding a spear, was clumsily warding off Tamoon's attack.

"You must be fast, Chee-koof. Again, parry, parry. Thrust."

Anger flared in him. He swung the staff around, aiming its bladed end at a metal disk on her shoulder. It punctured the thing, and Tamoon drew back, delighted.

"That is good," she told him. "Soon you will be ready for the games. Why does that not please you, Chee-koof?"

"Chekov. The only thing that would please me is to return to the ship. How did they get us here? Where is their power, Tamoon?"

"It is not permitted to discuss." She hesitated. "Tell me of this ship. What is there so pleasing? Your Provider? Does he care for you better?"

"I have no Provider. Earthpeople take care of themselves."

She stared at him. "Care for themselves? But that is not safe! Many things can happen! You must never return there, Chee-koof. It is not safe at all!"

Meanwhile, Shahna, laboring under the belief that Kirk's legs required exercise, had been leading him at a brisk trot through a field; and they were still trotting as they emerged from a clump of trees, side by side.

Slightly breathless, Kirk said, "We've covered over two miles. Isn't that enough? How about a breather?" And at her blank look, interpreted. "A rest."

"Oh… very well—if you are tired."

Kirk dropped down on the stone pediment of a ruined building; and after a pause, Shahna joined him.

Inhaling deeply, he said, "It was good to get away from that training area—even for a little while. Why do they like it, the Providers? Why do they want to watch others hurt, killed?"

The dark lashes lowered over the sapphire eyes. "It is the way."

"The voices sounded mechanical. Are they computers?"

The lashes lifted. "Computers?"

He answered his own question with another one, saying to himself, "But why, why would computers keep slaves? Shahna, have you ever seen them? Do they have bodies?"

"Not such as ours."

He looked off at the rubble of ruins at the edge of the trees. "What is that place, Shahna?"

"It is not used."

"Doesn't it have a name? It's very old. Probably built by humanoid people. Shahna, could this once have been a city of the Providers?"

Her voice shook. "I do not think it is well to ask such things."

"They have bodies," he said, "like ours… or they had."

She spoke firmly, almost angrily, "One does not talk of such things!"

"I see." And regretting the discomfort he'd caused her, changed the subject. "Pretty country. Looks very much like Earth."

As all he got was another blank look, he explained. "My home planet—where I was born."

"Planet?"

Well, he thought, I can instruct too. "Have you never looked at the night sky, Shahna? The lights up there?"

"Oh, those," she said. "I *have* looked at them."

"They're stars. And around them are planets—places… many of them like this—with people just like us living on them."

She was staring again. "How can one live on a flicker of light?"

He smiled at her. "From Earth, Triskelion's two suns seem only a flicker of light." Then sobering, he said, "Actually, this is the darkest planet I've ever seen."

"Dark? Why, all is lighted! Here… the chambers…"

"Dark," he insisted. "Thralls have no freedom, Shahna. You can't think or do anything but what your Providers tell you."

"What else would one do?"

She *was* beautiful, and her ignorance added a quality of pathos to the beauty.

"Love, for one thing," he said.

"What is love?"

He was tempted to kiss her, but refraining, said, "On Earth, it's more important than anything else, especially between a man and a woman."

Comprehension flooded her face. "Oh, we, too, have mates. When it is time to increase the herd, my Provider will select one for me."

"On Earth, we select our own mates. Somebody we care for, love. Men and women spend their lives together—sharing things… making each other happy."

Flushing, she whispered, "I do not think your words are allowed."

"All right. But tell me about the Providers. Where do they live? What do they look like?"

"I have never seen them, but they are said not to be like us. They stay in—"

Suddenly, the light on her collar went into glow. Shahna gasped. Kirk leaped to his feet, and looking up at him, she just managed to whisper, "I—I have… spoken… of the… forbidden. I must… be—"

She was choking with her agony. Going to her, Kirk stood beside her in his own agony of indecision, unable to help but only to watch her slip off the pediment and sink to the ground, writhing, strangling.

He glared around him. "Stop! I did it! I made her talk!" Then his voice rose to a scream. "Stop it, I tell you! You're killing her!"

But the jewel on the collar only glowed brighter. Shahna's face darkened with the uprush of blood, her mouth opening, her clawing hands falling away from the collar. Kirk whirled to the cliff above the gaming area, shaking his clenched fist at it. "*Stop it!*" he shouted again. "She did nothing wrong! It was my fault. If you want to punish someone, punish me! Please, please…"

He was half-aware of a strange rustling sound like electronic laughter. Then the light on Shahna's collar winked out. As he fell on his knees beside her, a voice spoke, the high, semi-soprano voice of Provider One.

"Is that what you humans call compassion? It is interesting, but it has no value here. You present many interesting aspects, Captain. But you must learn obedience. Then you will be an excellent Thrall."

Shahna had relaxed, her lungs sucking in great gulps of air. Released from her near-fatal agony, she began to sob. Kirk took her gently into his arms.

"I know," he said. "It's all right. You're safe now here in my arms —perfectly safe. Stop crying."

She leaned her head on his shoulder, the sobs quieting. Then looking up at him wonderingly, she said, "You risked bringing their anger on yourself. Why—why did you do it?"

He held her closer. "It's the custom for Earth people to help each other when they're in trouble."

He'd known it was coming, and it came—the moment of magic between them when the mysterious shuttle moves between a man and a woman, weaving, interweaving them together in the nameless bond.

He turned her face to his and kissed her.

She drew back, startled. Then while the sapphire eyes searched his, she lifted a finger and touched his lips with it softly. "And that —was that also helping?"

Smiling, he kissed the finger. "I suppose you could call it that."

Her eyes were shining. "Please… help me once again."

This time the kiss grew deep, complete, and her arms lifted, to go slowly around his neck. As he brushed his cheek against one, she withdrew them.

"I—I did not know it could be like this between people. Is it always so in the place you come from?"

He said, "It always should be like this for you, Shahna."

The rustle of high laughter echoed again, and Galt was abruptly with them. Silently, Kirk released the girl.

"Captain, you do indeed present many surprises. Because you have amused the Providers, there will be no punishment. Return to your quarters."

Kirk spoke softly to Shahna. "Come, we'll go together."

In the bridge command chair, Spock turned his head to the corner where Scott and McCoy were whispering together.

"Mr Scott."

Scott started guiltily. "Yes, sir."

"Are you unable to manage anything faster than Warp Six?"

Scott moved to the command chair. "It's my opinion, sir, that we've come much too far as it is."

McCoy joined them to add his support to Scott's opinion. "He's right, Spock. We lost Jim and the others back at Gamma II. You've dragged us a dozen light years out here on some wild hunch that —"

"I do not entertain hunches, Doctor. No transporter malfunction was responsible for the disappearance. They were not within the Gamma System. A focused beam of extremely high intensity energy was directed into the Gamma System from the binary system we are now approaching. No known natural phenomena would account for that beam. Does that not clarify the situation?"

"No, Spock, it doesn't. That's just a fancy way of saying you're playing a hunch. *My* hunch is that they're still back on Gamma II—dead or alive. And I want to make another search."

"Dr McCoy speaks for me too, sir," Scott said.

"Gentlemen, I am in command of this vessel. We will proceed on our present course—unless it is your intention to declare a mutiny."

Spock received their glares unmoved. And for a moment, his two leading officers felt what they had often felt before: an awe of Spock. Unnumbered had been the times he had demonstrated his

devotion to his Captain—a devotion now under cruel and lonely test. He would follow his own decision, unsupported, giving no sign whatever of any inward doubt of anxiety.

Scott could feel his respect for Kirk's best friend growing, suddenly. As to McCoy, he fell back on bluster.

"Who said anything about mutiny? You stubborn, pointed-eared… All right, but if we don't find them here, will you go back for another search of Gamma II?"

"Agreed, Doctor. Mr Scott, now can you give me Warp Seven?"

"Aye. And perhaps a bit more."

Spock spoke to the navigator. "Warp Seven, Ensign."

Nourishment Interval. Shahna, unlocking the door of Kirk's stall, entered it without looking at him. As she set down the food container, Kirk said, "You're late."

She nodded unhappily, still evading his eyes. He rose from his bench to take the container from her. "Are you disturbed about what happened today?"

"Yes."

"Because of me?"

"You—you have made me feel very strange. If it were allowed, I would ask that you be given another Drill Thrall."

He placed the container on the cubed stand. "I wouldn't like that, darling. I wouldn't like it at all."

He opened his arms to her and she walked straight into them. For a moment, she tried to resist his lips but then hungrily responded to them. Gathering her to him more closely, he suddenly dealt her a short, hard uppercut on the chin. As she went limp, sagging in his arms, he swiftly lifted her and placed her on the bench. The key to his stall door was in her harness. He took it. Then glancing down at her, regret in his eyes, he gently kissed her forehead.

"Sorry, Shahna. Sorry, darling."

Turning quickly to the door, he pressed the key to its lock. Ten seconds later, he was at Chekov's cell, releasing him. To his whispered question, Kirk shook his head. "No, she's out cold. What about Lars and Tamoon?"

"Uhura?"

She was beside him too, now in the corridor. "I told him I didn't like the food. He's gone to report me."

Chekov said, "Tamoon won't give us any trouble, either. But I think I've killed our romance."

In Chekov's stall, the fanged creature was seated on the floor, bound with part of her own harness. A metal pot covered her head to the mouth to stifle any muffled objections.

Kirk and Chekov exchanged grins, but Uhura ran forward to make sure the corridor was deserted. It was; and the three went quickly through its archway toward the gaming area.

With lowered voice, Kirk said, "I think Galt's the only one who can operate the collars. If we can find our phasers, we can use the circuits to short the collars out."

They had passed the central triangle when the Master Thrall made one of his sudden appearances.

"Stay where you are, Captain."

As Kirk hesitated, Galt closed his eyes. For a moment, the three slave collars glowed then went out.

From a wall, their owner spoke in his unmistakable high-pitched voice. "Only a reminder, Captain. You Earthmen are most unusual… most stimulating."

The next moment, they were surrounded by armed, sullen-faced Thralls.

Ensign Haines was the only member of the bridge personnel who had her eyes on her console.

"Standard orbit, Mr Spock."

Spock's eyes, like those of Scott and McCoy beside the command chair, were on the viewing screen. All watched the slowly rotating planet imaged on it.

"Sensors indicate only one concentration of life forms—in the lower hemisphere on the largest land mass." Spock's voice was toneless. "Humanoid readings, however."

"At least that gives our landing force a starting point," McCoy said.

"There will be no landing force, Doctor. Assuming that the Captain and the others are still alive, it would be unwise to endanger them by beaming down a large contingent."

"Well, we're not just going to leave them there while we sit here and wait, are we?"

Spock, leaving the command chair, was back at his scanner. Straightening, he said, "Interesting. The sensors record no power source. It might be shielded."

The strain was too much for McCoy. "Or it might be a wild-goose chase just as we've been telling you!"

"I shall beam down," Spock said. "If I am unable to communicate, a landing force may be necessary. You must make that decision, Mr Scott."

"Well, Spock, if you're going into a lions' den, you'll need a Medical Officer."

Getting to his feet, Spock said, "Daniel, as I recall, had only faith. But I welcome your company, Doctor. Mr Scott, you are in command."

"Aye, sir."

Without warning, the piercing metallic voice reverberated throughout the ship. "No, Mr Spock," said Provider One. "You will not leave the ship."

A silence, heavy as lead, fell over the bridge.

"What the de'il—" Scott began and broke off.

Miles, miles, miles below the *Enterprise*, the voice had been heard by Kirk, Chekov and Uhura on the gaming board, guarded by Lars, Tamoon, Shahna and Galt.

Provider One spoke again. "None of your control systems will operate."

Kirk was moistening his dry lips with his tongue when McCoy's familiar voice came. "Spock, what the hell is going on?"

Explanation there was none. How in the name of all the gods had the Providers arranged this simultaneous communication between their prisoners and his ship? Would his people hear him as clearly as he had heard McCoy?

Maybe. "Welcome to Triskelion, gentlemen," he said.

They *did* hear him. "Jim," McCoy cried, "is that you?"

"Yes. By now it must be obvious to you that you were expected."

Scott had been making a frantic check of controls. Finishing, he called, "It's true—what that thing said, Mr Spock. Nothing will respond."

Now there was a slight hint of amusement in Provider One's high voice. "Commendations, gentlemen. Your ingenuity in discovering the whereabouts of your companions is noteworthy."

They'll be trying to locate the voice, Kirk thought, and will fail just as we have. Well, he'd tell them what he could.

"What you are hearing, Mr Spock, is a Provider."

Provider One expanded his information. "We are known to our Thralls as Providers because we provide for all their needs. The term is easier for their limited mental abilities to comprehend, Mr Spock."

" 'Providing for their needs' means using Thralls—people stolen from every part of the galaxy—to fight each other while their owners gamble on the winner."

Spock, always, charmed by the idiosyncrasies of alien civilizations, said, "Indeed? Fascinating, Captain."

"Not in fact, Spock. These Providers lack even the courage to show themselves."

Provider One was roused to say, "Your species has much curiosity. However, we knew that. You are interesting in many ways."

The conversation had now become a dialogue between Kirk and his owner.

"But you *are* afraid!"

"You present no danger, Captain, while you wear the collar. And you will wear it for the rest of your life."

Did they hear it on the *Enterprise?*

"Then show yourselves!" Kirk shouted.

His challenge was followed by a high, electronic whispering, followed in its turn by an acceptance of the dare.

"There is no objection," said Provider One, and the next instant Kirk had vanished from the gaming board.

He found himself in a circular chamber. To his left was a crookedly shaped window, but the chief feature of the room was a column, widened at its top to support a transparent case. Within it was what seemed to be three blobs of protoplasm, veined and pulsating. No. Unskulled brains. Disembodied intellects, carefully preserving themselves in the satanic pride of unfeeling intellect, active only in the cause of its absolute certitudes.

Kirk left the column for the window and looked out on a vast underground complex, and too convoluted to divulge its details.

"So that's your power source," he said. "Shielded by solid rock."

"We are one-thousand of your meters beneath the surface," boasted Provider One.

Back at the brain case, Kirk said, "Primary mental development… primitive evolution."

And was promptly corrected by Provider Two. "That is not true, Captain. Once we had humanoid forms, but we evolved beyond

them."

Provider Three became self-defensive. "Through eons of devoting ourselves to intellectual pursuits, we became physically simple, the mentally superior brains you see before you."

Kirk allowed his scorn to sharpen his voice. "A species which enslaves others is hardly superior—mentally or otherwise."

He seemed to have touched Provider One on a raw place. "The Thralls are necessary to our games, Captain. We have found athletic competitions our sole diversion—the only thing which furnishes us with purpose."

"An unproductive purpose," Kirk observed. "Most unworthy of the greatest intellects in the galaxy."

The irony got through.

"We only use inferior beings."

"Inferior. Encased as you are, you don't get around much. We do. And we have found all life forms capable of superior development under proper guidance. Perhaps you're not so grandly evolved as you think."

He disconcerted them into a moment of silence finally broken by Provider Three. "An interesting speculation, Captain. You and your people are most challenging."

"Yes, most challenging," agreed Provider Two. "It was hoped that such new blood would stimulate our stock of Thralls. How unfortunate that you must be destroyed!"

"Our destruction will only result in your own. You may control the *Enterprise*, but you cannot match the power of the entire Federation."

Another raw place in Provider One. "Your ship will be shattered to bits by a magnetic storm. No communication with your base will be possible. Your fate will remain an eternal mystery to your Federation."

Kirk gave no sign of his shocked dismay. Yet, in spite of it, he was thinking harder than he'd ever thought in his life. He laughed. "And you call yourselves 'superior'! Why, you're just run-of-the-mill murderers-killers without the spirit to *really* wager for the lives you take!"

An electronic murmur of excitement came from the case.

"Wager?" queried Provider One. "Explain yourself, Captain."

Kirk drew himself up to his full height. "My people are the most enterprising, successful gamblers in the universe. We compete for

everything—power… fame… women… whatever we desire. It is our nature to win! I offer as proof our exploration of this galaxy."

"We are aware of your competitive abilities," pronounced Provider Three.

"Very well. Then I am willing to wager right now—and with any weapon you choose—that my people can overcome any fair number of Thralls set against them."

He'd been right. He'd caught them. Out of the case came the babble of bidding: "A hundred quatloos on the newcomers… two hundred against… four hundred against… five hundred for the newcomers… contest by multiple elimination!"

"Wait! Wait! Hear me out!" Kirk cried.

The voices stilled.

"We do not wager for trifles like quatloos! The stakes must be high!"

The silence prolonged itself until Provider One spoke. "Name your stakes, Captain."

"If my people win, the *Enterprise* and all its crew will leave here in safety. Furthermore, all Thralls on this planet will be freed."

"Anarchy! They would starve!"

Kirk ignored the comment. "They will be educated and trained by you to establish a normal, self-governing culture."

Incredulous, provider Three cried, "Thralls—govern themselves? Ridiculous!"

"We have done this same thing with many, many cultures throughout the galaxy. Do you then confess you cannot do what we can?"

"There is nothing we cannot do," Provider Two declared.

"And if you lose, Captain?"

It was Provider One's question, but he knew that the other two were waiting intently for his answer.

There was only one to make, and he made it. "If we lose, we will stay here—the entire *Enterprise* crew—the most stubborn and determined competitors anywhere. We will become Thralls, taking part in your games and obeying all orders without rebellion. You will be assured of generations of the most exciting wagering you've ever had."

A long silence passed before Provider One said, "Your stakes are indeed high, Captain."

"Not for *true* gamesters!"

The intellects once more conferred in their electronic mumble, their decision voiced by Provider Three. "We will accept your stakes on one condition, Captain."

"Name it."

"As leader of your people, your spirit seems most indomitable. We suggest you alone—pitted against three contestants of our choosing."

"One against three? Those are pretty high odds, aren't they?"

A vein throbbed in the brain of Provider Three as it gave a small, taunting chuckle. "Not for *true* gamesters, Captain!"

Kirk shook his head. "Your terms are unfair."

"On the contrary," Provider One said. "They are extremely fair inasmuch as your alternative is death."

Kirk gave himself time—time to think, time to consider the future of the *Enterprise* crew under the domination of these intellects, time to weigh it against his own death. If had been his life, the *Enterprise* and its people. Without them, death would be welcome.

"The wager is accepted," he said.

"Galt will prepare you."

It was extraordinary, the triumph the mere brain of Provider One could infuse into its thin, shrill voice. Then as abruptly as he'd appeared in the chamber, he was back in the gaming area, standing in the center triangle, faced by Lars, Kloog, Tamoon and Shahna.

He took the staff Galt handed him. As he hefted it, gauging its weight, the sharpness of its blade, the curve of its hook, Provider One spoke from a wall.

"Because you wager your skill for all your people, they will be permitted to watch the game's outcome on the ship's viewing screen."

And at the same moment, he heard Scott shout, "Mr Spock, look!"

All right. They knew what he felt about them. So the fact that he was willing to die to preserve them would come as no surprise. Yet he wasn't prepared for the stricken voice of McCoy. "What in the name of Heaven is…"

Scott's Highland realism spoke for him. "Heaven's got very little to do with this, Doctor."

Spock held up a hand for silence. And all of them heard Provider One.

"Captain, you will defend."

"Jim, Jim," McCoy whispered.

But Provider One had more to say.

"Thralls must stay in the blue shapes. You will take the yellow ones, Captain. Touching an opponent's colour deprives a contestant of one weapon. An opponent must be killed to be removed from the game. If only wounded, he is replaced by a fresh Thrall. Is that clear, Captain?"

"Clear."

"Very well. Begin."

Galt had pushed a dagger into Kirk's belt. Then a hooked net was hung over his right shoulder and a whip shoved into his hand. Four weapons, counting the quarterstaff. But his opponents only carried one, plus their daggers. Kloog, Lars and a strange Thrall positioned themselves in the blue shapes. A very strange Thrall, a bald thing, purple-skinned, its nose two holes covered by flaps of tissue, flapping up and down over its elementary nostrils with its breathing.

Kirk started with the staff.

All three closed in on him simultaneously, forcing the *Enterprise* Captain to make a sweeping move from his yellow triangle in order to parry the bald thing's assault with its spear. Leaping from the triangle into a yellow circle, he drove Kloog into a blue hexagon. Like his physical agility, his mental ability was working faster than his opponents'.

But at once Lars had rushed him with his net, and the bald Thrall, who'd fled around a yellow square, was slashing at him with its spear blade. Cool, now that the issue was finally joined, Kirk extended the hook of his own around Lars's ankle, downing him directly into the path of the oncoming Kloog. He felled the blond giant only to see the hairless alien strike at him again with its staff blade.

A high jump lifted him from the circle, replacing him on the yellow triangle.

Back on his feet, Lars raised his net. Its meshes engulfed Kirk, catching him; and Kloog, his gorilla jaw jutted, backed off for an effective blow with his whip. Kirk, drawing his dagger swiftly, cut himself free of the tangle, and Lars, unbelievingly, stumbled, staring idiotically at his torn weapon.

Despite the bald Thrall's skill, its nose shields were flapping breathlessly. It ran up behind Kirk, snuffling like a pig at its trough; but whirling, Kirk had glimpsed a yellow pentagon to his left. He

made its center and, turning, attacked the noseless thing with his staff, but it parried the strike with its own.

Kirk, however, had parried higher. Kloog, combined fear and rage inciting him, saw his chance and lashed Kirk around the body with his stinging, curling whip. Kirk's staff broke—broke in half. He wheeled, spun out of the whip, and, leaping from the pentagon, flung his staff's new-made spear at Kloog. It struck in the matted hair of his chest, drawing blood. He retreated.

Lars, with his ripped net, at once took up Kloog's position. Its uncut meshes fell over Kirk and Lars raised his dagger for the kill. Looking at the heavy blond face, merciless, Kirk said to himself, "So this is it. Okay, I die. But so does everybody else in the end."

Was it that acceptance of mortality which gave him the momentary detachment he so needed? In it, as though from a great distance, he saw the bald thing lift its spear, hurl it at him, and he ducked it. It entered Lars's stomach.

Who's to know?

There are divinites that shape our ends of which we know nothing. Vigor renewed itself in Kirk. He struggled out of the net, and the bald alien, snatching it up, yanked its dagger from its belt. Now it was armed with net, dagger and quarterstaff.

It feinted with the staff, grabbing his whip from him, but Kirk reached for it, recovered it and threw it clear of the game floor. Now it was repellently close body contact with the freak, its nose shields fluttering in Kirk's face. He wrested himself free, making another forward leap to the yellow circle.

But once more the net descended. The bald one dived at him. Somehow, he released his dagger hand, and pushing the thing aside, lashed out with his own dagger across the purple body. It collapsed, not dead, but so wounded that it couldn't rise. And at once, as Lars had been, was dragged from the field of battle by expressionless fellow Thralls, moving in from the sidelines.

Behind it, it left a thick pool of purple blood. Kirk closed his eyes against the sight. What a planet! If this insane mayhem was the result of supreme intellect, the humanoids of the galaxy would be well advised to go back to primeval seas as protozoa.

He opened his eyes. Vaulting over a blue circle, he landed on the yellow triangle's sanctuary for what he had seen was Shahna, her spear lifted, racing at him from the sidelines to challenge him.

He moved unsteadily to meet her, the muscles of his legs unreliable and barely able to clutch the splintered half of his quarterstaff.

"You lied," she said. "Everything you said…" and lunged at him. He fell to one knee. Then hacking his way upright, he called on all his brute strength to get under her guard and drive his blade's point into her breast.

Kill a woman in cold blood. He'd never done it. He paused, but Shahna was preparing for the death thrust, pulling back to gain impetus for another lunge at him. Then she knocked his blade aside to press her own against his heart.

Their blades crossed, bringing them face to face.

Suddenly, her lower lip began to tremble. "You—you *did* lie."

Her whispered breath was fragrant as roses. And once more the indefinable shuttle between man and woman was moving, interlacing, as mysteriously powerful as the divinities shaping our ends. Would it continue its weaving? All she'd ever known was fighting; but love? Only what he'd been able to teach her.

The dark-lashed eyes were deep in his, asking, searching.

Tears flooded the eyes. Dropping her blade, she turned to a wall, crying, "The Thralls surrender!"

He'd have to leave her, but he'd made a woman out of her. And who was to profit by her loveliness? Kloog… the bald horror? There were disadvantages to command of a Starship, roaming, roaming endlessly through the galaxy.

He was about to take her in his arras when he heard the voice of Provider One.

"You have won, Captain Kirk. Unfortunately. However, the terms of the wager will be honored. You are free. Remove your collars. Thralls, hear me!"

Kirk placed his hand on Shahna's collar. It came away easily. Then as he removed his own, he heard clash after metallic clash of other collars striking the floor. Shahna stared at the broken symbol of her slavery in his hand, unbelieving. Then the sapphire eyes veered to him. At the look in them, it was just as well that Galt reached them, carrying his former prisoners' phasers and communicators.

Kirk addressed a wall. "The Thralls will he trained?"

"They will be trained. We have said it, Captain Kirk."

"You may find that a more exciting game than the one you have been playing. A body is no good without a brain. But you've found a brain isn't worth much without a body."

Shahna said, "Darling."

He looked down at her. No, they could share no future. If only… He pulled himself together. "I didn't lie, Shahna. I only did what was necessary. Someday, you'll understand."

"I—I understand a… little. You will leave us now?"

He nodded, unable to speak.

"To go back to the lights in the sky? I… want to go to… those lights… with you. Take me."

"I can't."

"Then teach me how, and I'll follow you."

Providers, witnesses notwithstanding, he took her in his arms. "There are many things you have to learn first—things the Providers will teach you. Learn them. All your people must learn them before you can reach for the stars."

Holding her closer, he kissed her.

"Goodbye, darling, my darling."

Then he released her; and striding quickly across the board, joined the awed Chekov and Uhura. Nor did he look back as he opened his communicator.

"Beam us up, Mr Scott."

The well-known voice said, "Aye, sir."

Alone on the board, Shahna watched the shimmer as his body went into sparkle—and he was gone with his people.

She bowed her head to hide the tears. "Goodbye, my Kirk. I will learn. And watch the lights in… the sky… and always, always remember."

So would he. But gradually—and mercifully—the memory of Triskelion's beautiful woman would begin to fade, along with the sweetness of her breath on his face.

OBSESSION

(Art Wallace)

The ore was peculiar-looking, a harsh purple-black. Kirk struck it with a rock; but apart from its responsive clanging sound, it showed no trace of the blow. As he tossed the rock aside, he said, "Fantastic! It must be twenty times as hard as steel even in its raw state!"

Spock, his tricorder focused on the ore, said, "To be exact, Captain, 21.4 times as hard as the finest manganese steel."

Kirk opened his communicator. "Scotty? You can mark this vein of ore as confirmed. Inform Starfleet I recommend they dispatch a survey vessel to this planet immediately." As he spoke, a puff of white vapor drifted up over the rock matrix of the ore—a whisp of vapor hidden from the *Enterprise* men both by the rock's jutting and obscuring vegetation.

Scott said, "Acknowledged, Captain. They'll send a vessel fast enough for this rich a find."

Spock had pulled his phaser. "We won't be able to break it. I'll shoot off a sample."

Kirk didn't answer. He had stiffened abruptly, frowning, sniffing the air around him, his face strained like that of a man whose past had suddenly shouldered out his present. A shard of rock, grape-purple with the ore, had broken off; and the white vapor, as though guided by some protective intelligence, swiftly withdrew behind the big rock's shelter. As Spock rose from retrieving the ore sample, Kirk spoke. "Notice it?" he said. "A sweetish odor—a smell like honey? I wonder. It was years ago on a different planet… a 'thing' with an odor like that."

Some indefinable appeal in his voice moved Spock to say reassuringly, "This is the growing season in the hemisphere of this planet. There are doubtless many forms of pollen aromas around, Captain."

But Kirk was not soothed. He didn't seem to even have heard. Beckoning to the landing party's security officer, he said,

"Lieutenant Rizzo, take two men and make a swing around our perimeter. Scan for any gaseous di-kironium in the atmosphere."

"Di-kironium," Spock observed, "does not exist except in laboratory experiments."

Kirk ignored the comment. "Set phasers on Disruptor-B. If you see any gaseous cloud, fire into it instantly. Make your sweep, Lieutenant."

A beep beeped from the open communicator in his hand; and Scott's voice said, "Ready to beam back aboard, sir?"

"Stand by, Scotty. We're checking something out."

"Sir, the U.S.S. *Yorktown* is expecting to rendezvous with us in less than eight hours. Doesn't leave us much time."

"Acknowledged. Continue standing by. Kirk out."

Spock, scanning the ore sample, spoke, his voice flat with awe. "Purity about eighty-five percent, Captain. With enough of this, they'll be building Starships with twice our warp capacity."

But Kirk was sniffing the air again. "Gone," he said. "It's gone now. I could have been wrong. The last time I caught that odor was about twelve years ago." He looked away to where the security officer and his men were quartering the area. Rizzo, standing near a small hillock, was bent over his tricorder. It had suddenly registered di-kironium on the air. Puzzling over it, he didn't see the cloud of white vapor encroaching on them from behind the hillock. "But that isn't possible," Rizzo muttered to himself. "Nothing can do that."

The vaporous cloud, however, seemed to obey laws of its own. One moment it had been wispy, diaphonous; but in the next it had thickened to a dense fog, moving suddenly and swiftly, emitting a humming creature sound.

The scouting party whirled as one man. The coiling colors that had appeared in the cloud reached out a tentacle of green which touched the nearest security man. He grabbed at his throat and fell to the ground. As the second security man gagged, Rizzo pulled his phaser. Where to direct his fire? Into the center of the cloud? Where? He hesitated—and Kirk's communicator beeped.

"Captain… cloud," Rizzo choked. "A strange cloud."

Tire your phasers at its center!" Kirk shouted.

"Sir, we—help!"

"Spock, with me!" yelled Kirk. He raced toward the hillock, his phaser drawn.

But the gaseous cloud was gone. Rizzo lay face down on the grass, his communicator still clutched in his hand. The bodies of his men lay near by. Kirk glanced around before he hurried to Rizzo. The officer was very pale. But where Rizzo's flesh was pale, the bodies of his men were bone-white. Kirk lifted his head. "Dead," he said. "And we'll find every red corpuscle has been drained from their blood."

"At least Rizzo's alive," Spock said. "As you were saying—you suspect what it was, Captain?"

Kirk had taken out his communicator. He nodded. "A 'thing'? something that can't possibly exist. Yet which *does exist.*" He flipped the communicator open. "Captain to *Enterprise.* Lock in on us, Scotty! Medical emergency!"

He was in Sickbay. It didn't offer much room to pace. So he stood still while Christine Chapel handed the cartridge of tapes to Bones.

"The autopsy reports, Doctor."

"Thank you."

Kirk extended a hand to Christine's arm. "Nurse, how is Lieutenant Rizzo?"

"Still unconscious, Captain."

"Transfusions?" he said.

"Continuing as rapidly as possible, sir. Blood count still less than sixty percent of normal."

Kirk glanced at McCoy. But Bones was still deep in the autopsy reports. Kirk closed his eyes, running a hand over his forehead. Then he crossed to a communicator panel equipped with a small viewing screen.

"Kirk to bridge."

The voice was Spock's. "Ready to leave orbit, sir."

"Hold our position."

The image of Spock was supplanted by Scott's. "Cutting in, if I may, sir. The *Yorktown's* expecting to rendezvous with us in less than seven hours."

The heat of sudden rage engulfed Kirk. "Then inform them we may be late!"

McCoy turned from his desk. "Jim, the *Yorktown's* ship surgeon will want to know how late. The vaccines he's transfering to us are highly perishable."

Spock reappeared on the screen. "Sir, those medical supplies are badly needed on planet Theta Seven. They're expecting us to get them there on time."

I am hounded, Kirk thought. He looked from Spock back to McCoy. "Gentlemen," he said, "we are staying here in orbit until I learn more about those deaths. I am quite aware this may cost lives on planet Theta Seven. What lives are lost are my responsibility. Captain out." He switched off the screen, and addressed McCoy. "Autopsy findings?"

"You saw their color," McCoy said. "There wasn't a red corpuscle left in those bodies."

"Cuts? Incisions? Marks of any kind?"

"Not a one. What happened is medically impossible."

Kirk became conscious of a vast impatience with the human race. "I suggest," he said coldly, "that you check our record tapes for similar occurrences in the past before you speak of medical 'impossibilities'. I have in mind the experience of the U.S.S. *Farragut.* Twelve years ago it listed casualties from exactly the same impossible medical causes."

McCoy was eyeing him speculatively. "Thank you, Captain," he said tonelessly. "I'll check those tapes immediately."

"Yes, do," Kirk said. "But before you do, can you bring Lieutenant Rizzo back to consciousness for a moment?"

"Yes, I think so but—"

"Will it hurt him if you do?"

"In his condition it won't make much difference."

Then bring him out of it," Kirk said. "I must ask him a question."

As they approached Rizzo's bed, Nurse Chapel was removing a small black box that had been strapped to his arm. "Transfusions completed, Doctor," she said. "Pulse and respiration still far from normal."

"Give him one cc. of cordrazine."

The nurse stared. Then picking up a hypodermic, she adjusted it. As it hissed against Rizzo's arm, Kirk's hands tightened on the bed bar until his knuckles whitened. On the pillow he saw the head move slightly. Kirk leaned in over Rizzo. "Lieutenant, this is the Captain. Can you hear me? Do you remember what happened to you?"

The eyelids fluttered. "Remember… I'm cold," Rizzo whispered. "So… cold."

Kirk pressed on. "Rizzo, you were attacked by something. When it happened, did you notice an odor of any kind?" His hands were shaking on the bed bar. He leaned in closer. "Rizzo, remember. A sickly sweet odor. Did you smell it?"

Horror filled the eyes. "Yes, sir… the smell… strange… like… like being smothered in honey."

Kirk exhaled a deep, quivering breath. "And—did you feel a—a *presence?* An intelligence?"

The head moved in assent. "It… it wanted strength from us. Yes, I felt it sucking. It was there."

McCoy moved in. "He's asleep. We can't risk another shot, Captain."

"He told me what I wanted to know."

"I wouldn't depend on his answers. In his half-conscious state, he could be dreaming, saying what he thought you wanted to hear."

Kirk straightened. "Check those record tapes, Doctor. I'll want your analysis of them as quickly as possible."

He left; Christine Chapel turned a puzzled face to McCoy. "What's the matter with the Captain, sir? I've never seen him like this."

"I intend to find out," McCoy said. "If I'm wanted, I'll be in the medical library."

On the bridge, Uhura greeted Kirk with a message from Starfleet. To her astonishment, he brushed it aside with a "Later, Lieutenant. Now have the security duty officer report to me here and at once." He crossed to Spock who said, "Continuing scanning, sir. Still no readings of life forms on the planet surface."

"Then, Mr Spock, let's assume that it's something so totally different that our sensors would fail to identify it as a life form."

"You've mentioned—di-kironium, Captain."

"A rare element, Mr Spock. Suppose a life form were composed of it, a strange, gaseous creature."

"There is no trace of di-kironium on the planet surface or in the atmosphere. I've scanned for the element, sir."

"Suppose it were able to camouflage itself?"

"Captain, if it were composed of di-kironium, lead, gold, hydrogen—whatever—our sensors would pinpoint it."

"Let's still assume I'm right."

"An illogical assumption, Captain. There is no way to camouflage a given chemical element from a sensor scan."

"No way? Let's further assume it's intelligent and knows we're looking for it."

"Captain, to hide from a sensor scan, it would have to be able to change its molecular structure."

Kirk stared at him. "Like gold changing itself to lead or wood to ivory. Mr Spock, you've just suggested something which never occurred to me. And it answers some questions in a tape record which I think you'll find Dr McCoy is studying at this very moment."

Spock was on his feet. "Mr Chekov! Take over on scanner." He was at the bridge elevator door as it hissed open to permit the entrance of the security duty officer. He was a new member of the crew, young, bright-faced, clearly dedicated as only the untried idealism of youth can dedicate itself. He strode to Kirk and saluted. "Ensign David Garrovick reporting, sir."

Kirk turned, startled. "You're the new security officer?"

"Yes, sir."

Kirk hesitated a moment. Then he said, "Was your father—?"

"Yes, sir. But I don't expect any special treatment on that account."

The shock in Kirk's face subsided. Now he snapped, "You'll get none aboard this ship, mister!"

"Yes, sir."

Uhura broke in. "I have a report on Lieutenant Rizzo, Captain. He's dead."

Kirk leaned back in his chair. It had been costly—the discovery of that so-precious purple ore. He turned back to the new security officer when he realized that Garrovick's face was grief-stricken, too.

"Did you know Rizzo?" Kirk said.

"Yes, sir. We were good friends. Graduated the Academy together."

Kirk nodded. "Want a crack at what killed him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Equip four men with phaser twos set for Disruptor effect. Report to the Transporter Room in five minutes. You will accompany me to the planet surface."

It was Garrovick who took the first tricorder reading of the terrain where the team materialized. Suddenly, he called to Kirk. "Sir, the reading is changing!"

Kirk crossed to him swiftly. Nodding, he examined the tricorder. "Spock was right," he said. "See—there's been a molecular shift."

"A di-kironium reading now, sir. Bearing is 94 mark 7, angle of elevation 6 degrees. Holding stationary."

Kirk pointed to a lift in the ground. "Behind that rise. Take two men and approach it from the right. I'll take two around the other way. As soon as you sight the creature, fire with full phasers. Remember—it's extremely dangerous."

Garrovick looked at the hill nervously. "Yes… sir." The words were spoken tightly. Kirk glanced at the tense young face. Then, turning, he said, "Swanson and Bardoli, come with me."

Garrovick and his two men had climbed the rise when he noticed that it fell to a deep gully. His men fanned out past the ravine. Garrovick stood still for a moment, staring down into it. Then, making his decision, he descended it, moving forward cautiously. Suddenly the white vapor gathered before him. Startled, taken off-guard by its foglike appearance, he stared at it, uncertain. Then he aimed his phaser and fired. The slice of its beam was a second too. late. The cloud was gone.

Kirk yelled, "A phaser shot!" Racing toward the hill, he shouted, "Come on!"

He found Garrovick scrambling up the side of the gully, his eyes fixed on something ahead of him. "Garrovick, did you—?" He stopped short as he saw what Garrovick was crawling toward. The two men of his patrol lay motionless on the ground.

Kirk ran to the nearest one. When Garrovick joined him, his young face turned smeary with shock and misery. The features that stared up sightlessly from the ground were bone-white.

Kirk was alone in the Briefing Room. It felt good to be alone. Alone, it was easier to hold on to his conviction that the murderous creature which had killed five of his crewmen was the same one that had decimated the crew of the U.S.S. *Farragut* twelve years before in another quadrant of the galaxy. Five men. Sickbay had the unconscious survivor of Garrovick's team under treatment; but its transfusion had been unable to save the life of Rizzo. The thing was, he wasn't really alone. You never were. Always, you had the unspoken thoughts of other people to

companion you. And he had the unspoken thoughts of Spock and McCoy to keep him company. Neither one credited the creature with its malignancy nor its intelligence. Moreover, they disapproved his decision to remain here and fight it to the death. And maybe they were right. Had he made a reliable command decision—or an emotional one?

He'd laid his forearms on the Briefing Room table. Now he lifted his head from them as Spock, followed by McCoy and Garrovick, entered. Spock and McCoy both gave him sharply appraising looks as they sat down. They tried to appear as though they hadn't—but they had. In his turn, Kirk tried to appear as though he hadn't noticed the looks.

He opened the session. "We've studied your report, Mr Garrovick. I believe Mr Spock has a question."

Spock said, "What was the size of the creature, Ensign?"

"I'd estimate it measured from ten to sixty cubic meters, sir. It changed size, fluctuated as it moved."

"Composition?"

"It was like a gaseous cloud, sir. Parts of it I could see through; other parts seemed more dense."

McCoy spoke. "Ensign, did you 'sense' any intelligence in this gaseous cloud?"

"Did I what, sir?"

"Did you get any subconscious impression that it *was* a creature? A living, thinking thing rather than just a strange cloud of chemical elements?"

"No, sir."

Kirk eyed Garrovick who twisted uncomfortably. "Ensign, you never came into actual contact with it, did you?"

"No, I didn't, sir. I was the furthest away." He paused. "It came out of nowhere, it seemed. It hovered a moment, then moved toward the nearest man. Fast, incredibly fast."

Kirk shoved a pencil on the table. "Did you say it hovered?"

"Yes, sir."

"You fired at it, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"How close were you to the creature?"

"About twenty yards, sir."

"And you missed a hovering, large target at that distance?"

"Yes, sir. I… well, I didn't fire while it was hovering."

"Do you mean that you froze?"

"Not exactly, sir."

"Then tell us what you mean exactly."

"I was startled… maybe only for a second or so. And then by the time I fired, it—well, it was already moving."

Kirk's tone was curt. "Do you have any additional information for us?"

"No, sir. I only—hesitated for a second or so, sir. I'm sorry."

"Ensign, you're relieved of all duties and confined to your quarters until further notice."

Garrovick straightened. "Yes, sir."

McCoy's eyes followed him to the closing door. "You were a little hard on him, Jim."

"He froze. One of his men was killed. The other will probably die."

"Captain," Spock began.

Kirk rose. "You'll both be filing reports, gentlemen. Make your comments and recommendations then." He crossed briskly to the door. As he slammed it behind him, McCoy and Spock were left to stare at each other.

Garrovick's room was as dark as his discouragement. He found the light switch affixed to its panel with its labeled temperature gauges and other controls. Above the panel was an open-close switch marked "Ventilation Filter By-Pass." Garrovick, closing his eyes to all circumstances of his surroundings, gave himself up to his depression.

Back on the bridge, Kirk was greeted by another message from the *Yorktown* requesting information on the rendezvous. He ignored it; and Scott, approaching him, said, "While we wait, Captain, I've taken the liberty of cleaning the radioactive disposal vent on the number-two impulse engine. But we'll be ready to leave orbit in under half an hour."

"We're not leaving orbit, Engineer. Not that quickly."

Scott didn't take the hint. "The medicine for the Theta Seven colony is not only desperately needed, Captain, but has a limited stability. And—"

Kirk wheeled. "I am," he said, "familiar with the situation, Engineer. And I'm getting a little tired of my officers conspiring

against me to force—" He broke off at the look on Scott's face. "Forgive me, Scotty. I shouldn't have used the word 'conspiring'."

"Agreed, sir."

Kirk strode over to Chekov. "Scanner readings?"

"Nothing, sir. Continuing to scan."

"Mr Chekov, you're aware it may be able to change its composition? Are you scanning for any unusual movements? Any type of gaseous cloud?"

"We've run a full scanner probe twice, sir."

"*Then do it twenty times if that's what it takes!*"He barked the words and left the bridge to his shocked personnel.

Garrovick wasn't the only victim of depression. McCoy, viewing an autopsy tape, pulled it out of its slot, controlling an impulse to throw it to the floor. When Spock entered his office, he spoke no word of greeting.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you, Doctor."

"Interrupting another autopsy report is no disturbance, Spock. It's a relief."

"I need your advice," Spock said.

"Then I need a drink," said McCoy.

"I don't follow your reasoning, Doctor."

"*You* want advice from me? You must be kidding."

"I never joke. Perhaps I should rephrase my statement. I require an opinion. There are many aspects of human irrationality I do not yet comprehend. Obsession for one. The persistent, singleminded fixation on one idea."

"Jim and his creature?"

"Precisely. Have you studied the incident involving the U.S.S. *Farragut?*"

"With all these deaths and injuries, I've barely had time to scan them."

"Fortunately, I read fast," Spock said. "To summarize those records, I can inform you, Doctor, that almost half the crew, including the Captain, was annihilated. The Captain's name was Garrovick."

McCoy gave a startled whistle. "The same as our Ensign?"

"His father," Spock said. "I have the *Farragut* file here with me."

"Then there's more," McCoy said.

Spock nodded gravely. "A great deal more. Among the survivors of the disaster was a young officer on one of his first deep-space assignments." He nodded again at McCoy's look. "Yes, James T. Kirk," he said—and dropped the cartridge he held into the viewer. "And there's still more. I think you'd better study this record, Doctor."

Twenty minutes later McCoy sought the quarters of James T. Kirk, formerly of the U.S.S. *Farragut.* There was no response to the buzz at their door. McCoy opened it. "Mind if I come in, Jim?"

Kirk was lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He made no move. He spoke no word. Then, with a bound, he was off the bed to flip the switch on the wall communicator. "Kirk to bridge. Scanner report?"

Chekov's filtered voice said, "Continuing scanning, sir. No unusual readings."

"Maintain search. Kirk out." He turned from the communicator and jammed his right fist into his left hand. "It can't just vanish!" he cried.

"Sometimes they do if we're lucky." McCoy sat down. "Monsters come in many forms, Jim. And know what's the greatest monster of them all? Guilt, known or unknown."

Kirk's jaw hardened. "Get to the point."

"Jim… a young officer exposed to unknown dangers for the first time is under tremendous emotional stress. We all know how—"

"Ensign Garrovick is a ship command decision, Doctor. You're straying out of your field."

"I was speaking," McCoy said, "of Lieutenant James T. Kirk of the Starship *Farragut.*"

Kirk stared at him. He didn't speak, and McCoy went on. "Twelve years ago you were the young officer at the phaser station when something attacked your ship. According to the tape, this young officer insisted on blaming himself—"

"I delayed my fire at it!"

McCoy spoke sharply. "You had a normal, *human* emotion! *Surprise!* You were startled. You delayed firing for the grand total of perhaps two seconds!"

Kirk's face had grown drawn with remembered anguish. "If I hadn't delayed, the thing would have been destroyed!"

"The ship's exec didn't think so. His log entry is quite clear on the subject. He reported, 'Lieutenant Kirk is a fine officer who

performed with uncommon bravery.' "

"I killed nearly two hundred men!"

McCoy's voice was very quiet. "Captain Garrovick was important to you, wasn't he?"

Kirk's shoulders slumped. He sank down on his bed, wringing his hands. "He was my commanding officer from the day I left the Academy. He was one of the finest men I ever knew." He leaped to his feet again. "I could have destroyed it! If I'd fired soon enough that first time…"

"*You don't know that, Jim!* You can't know it! Any more than you can know young Garrovick could have destroyed it."

Kirks face was wiped clean of all emotions but torture. "I owe it to this ship…"

"To be so tormented by a memory… Jim, you can't destroy a boy because you see him as yourself as you were twelve years ago. You'll destroy yourself, your brilliant career."

"*I've got to kill this thing!* Don't ask me how I know that. I just know it."

McCoy eyed Kirk for a long moment. Then he rose and moved to the door, pressing the control that opened it. "Come in, Mr Spock," he said.

Kirk whirled, crying, "Bones, don't push our friendship past the point that—"

McCoy interrupted. "This is professional, Captain. I am preparing a medical log entry on my estimate of the physical and emotional condition of a Starship's Captain. I require a witness of command rank."

Kirk's eyes swung from one of them to the other. Time—an infinity of it—went by. His voice when he spoke was edged with fury. "Do I understand, Doctor—and you, Commander Spock, that both or either of you believe me unfit or incapacitated?"

Spock said, "Correctly phrased as recommended in the manual, Captain. Our reply as also recommended is: Sir, we have noticed in your recent behavior items which, on the surface, seem unusual. We respectfully ask your permission to inquire further and—"

"Blast! Forget the manual!" Kirk shouted. "Ask your questions!"

Imperturbable, Spock said, "The U.S.S. Y*orktown* is now waiting for us at the appointed rendezvous, Captain. It carries perishable drugs which—"

Kirk ran a trembling hand over his forehead. "The news has a familiar ring, Commander."

McCoy said, "They need those vaccines on Theta Seven, Jim. Why are we delaying here?"

"Because I know what I know," Kirk said. "The creature that attacked the *Farragut* twelve years ago is the same—"

"Creature?" Spock said.

"Yes. My report was in the tape. As it attacked us twelve years ago, just as I lost consciousness, I could *feel* the intelligence of the thing; I *could* sense it thinking, planning."

"You say you could 'sense' its intelligence, Captain. How?" Spock said. "Did it communicate with you?"

McCoy broke in. "You state that it happened just as you lost consciousness. The semi-conscious mind is a tricky thing, Jim. A man can never be sure how much was real, how much was semi-conscious fancy."

"Real or unreal, Bones, it was deadly, lethal."

"No doubt of that," McCoy said.

"And if it *is* the same creature I met twelve years ago on a planet over a thousand light years from here?"

"Obviously, Captain, if it is an intelligent creature, if it is the same one, if therefore it is capable of space travel, it could pose a grave threat to inhabited planets."

"A lot of 'ifs,' Commander, I agree. But in my command judgment they still outweigh other factors. 'Intuition,' however illogical, Commander Spock, is recognized as a command prerogative."

"Jim, we're not trying to gang up on you."

"You haven't, Doctor. You've indicated a proper concern. You've both done your duty. May I be informed now of what medical log entry you intend to make?"

Spock and McCoy exchanged glances. "Jim," McCoy began.

Kirk smiled. "You've been bluffing, gentlemen. I'm calling your bluff."

Spock spoke. "This was totally my idea, Captain. Dr McCoy's human affection for you makes him completely incapable of—"

McCoy interrupted. "*My affection* for him! I like that! Why, I practically had to sandbag you into this!" He turned to Kirk. "Jim, we were just using this to try and talk some sense into—"

The communicator beeped with the intercom signal. Chekov's excited voice said, "Bridge to Captain! Come in, Captain!"

Kirk was at the grill in a second flat. "Kirk here, Mr Chekov."

"I have a reading on the—whatever it is, Captain! It's leaving the planet surface and heading into space!"

It was the measure of Kirk's nature that no triumph whatever colored the tone of his orders. "All decks, red alert! Prepare to leave orbit!"

Then he was gone out his door.

Gone out his door on a wild goose chase. Only what Kirk and the *Enterprise* chased through the labyrinths of trackless space was no wild goose. It was subtle as a cobra, swift as a mamba in its flight from the *Enterprise,* leading the Starship ever farther from its meeting with the *Yorktown* and its mission of mercy.

On the bridge they all knew what was at stake. The thing had twice changed its course in a malevolent, deliberate effort to mislead. Kirk was exhilarated past anxiety. But Scott was worried. "Captain, we can't maintain Warp 8 speed much longer. Pressures are approaching a critical point."

"Range, Mr Chekov?" Kirk said.

"Point zero four light years ahead, sir. Our phasers won't reach it."

Spock spoke. "Captain, we're barely closing on it. We could be pursuing it for days."

"If necessary," Kirk said. He turned. "Do what you can to increase our speed, Mr Scott."

"Aye, sir."

"Let's see it," Kirk said.

Chekov hit a button. "Magnification twelve, sir. There, sir! Got it on the screen!"

It was moving across the screen like an elongated comet, a coiling vortex floating amidst whirling vapors.

"How do you read it, Mr Spock?"

"Conflicting data, sir. It seems to be in a borderline state between matter and energy. It can possibly utilize gravitational fields for propulsion."

"You don't find that sophisticated, Mr Spock?"

"Extremely efficient, Captain." He paused. "Whether it indicates intelligence is another matter."

Chekov had got a red light on his console. "Open hatch on number-two impulse engine, sir. Mr Scott was doing a clean-up job

on it."

"Turn off the alarm," Kirk said. "We won't be using the impulse engines."

Scott turned from his station. "Captain! We can't do it! If we hold this speed, she'll blow up any minute!"

Kirk swallowed the pill of reality. "All right," he said. "Reduce to Warp Six."

In Garrovick's quarters the door buzzer sounded and Christine Chapel entered, carrying a dinner tray.

"Thank you," Garrovick said. "I'm not hungry."

"Dr McCoy's orders."

"What's happening?" Garrovick said.

"Are we still chasing that thing half across the galaxy? Yes, we are. Has the Captain lost his sense of balance? Maybe. Is the crew about ready to explode? *Positively.* You're lucky to be out of it, Ensign."

Garrovick's voice was acid with bitterness. "Out of it? I *caused* it."

She calmly continued to spread food before him. "You know that's true, don't you?" he said. "If I'd fired my phaser quickly enough back on Argus Ten, none of this would have happened."

"Self-pity is a poor appetizer," she said. Try the soup instead."

"I don't want it."

"If you don't eat," she told him, "Dr McCoy will have you hauled down to Sickbay and make me feed you intravenously. I don't want to do that, either." Garrovick feebly returned her smile, nodded in defeat, and began to pick at his food. But it was no good. As the door closed behind her, a burst of frustration overwhelmed him. He dashed a cup of coffee he'd just poured against the wall. It hit the panel. Shattering against the switch of the ventilation filter by-pass, it knocked it to the open position.

At the same moment the strident alarm signal sounded. Kirk's voice came over the communicator.

"Battle stations! All decks to battle stations! The enemy is reducing speed! This is not a drill! All decks to battle stations!"

On the bridge Chekov shouted. "It's coming to a full halt, Captain! Magnification one, visual contact!"

Centered on the screen, now only a small object, the strange creature seemed to be pulsating. Kirk said, "Hello, Beautiful." Then he leaned toward Chekov. "Move in closer, Mr Chekov. Sublight, one quarter speed."

As Chekov manipulated his controls, the bridge elevator door opened; and Garrovick, his face pale with tension, emerged to cross quickly over to Kirk. "Sir, request permission to return to my post."

"Within phaser range now, sir!" cried Chekov.

"Lock phasers on target, Mr Chekov!"

"Locked on target, sir!"

"Fire main phasers!"

But the fierce energy blips passed directly through the creature. Stunned, Kirk watched in unbelief.

"Phasers ineffectual, Captain!"

"Photon torpedoes, Mr Chekov! Minimum spread pattern!"

"Minimum pattern ready, sir!"

"Fire!"

The ship lurched slightly. The target emitted a flash of blinding light and the *Enterprise* rocked. Uhura cried, "There—on the screen! It's still coming toward us, sir!"

The vaporous creature was growing larger, denser on the screen. "Deflectors up!" Kirk ordered.

"Deflectors up, sir."

Spock spoke into the awed silence. "The deflectors will not stop it, Captain." He was stooping, intent on his hooded viewer. "I should have guessed this! For the creature to be able to use gravity as a propulsive force, it would have to possess the capacity to flow through our deflector screens!"

"Any way to stop it, Mr Spock?"

"Negative, Captain. It is able to throw its particles slightly out of time synchronization. It seems to measure our force-field pulsations—and stays a split second in front or behind them."

Chekov said, "Contact in five seconds, sir!"

Kirk hit his intercom button. "All decks, all stations, intruder alert!"

"All vents and hatches secure, sir," Chekov said. "All lights on the board show green—*No! Sir, the number-two impulse hatch! We've got a red light on it!*

Kirk whirled toward the screen. The cloudlike thing was on the ship now. Suddenly, it disappeared.

Scott turned, crying, "Captain! Something has entered through the number-two impulse vent!"

"Negative pressure all ship's vents! Mr Chekov alert all decks!"

Red lights flashed to the ear-splitting howl of the alarm sirens.

"Well? Reports?"

Though Spock and McCoy sat at the Briefing Room table, it was Scott to whom the questions were directed. He knew it and looked away from Kirk's accusing eyes. "Sir, when it entered through impulse engine-two vent, it attacked two crewmen there before it went into the ventilation system."

"Bones?" Kirk said.

"One man has a bare chance of survival. The other is dead. So you can hang that little price tag to your monster hunt!"

"That's enough, Bones."

"It's *not* enough! You didn't care what happened as long as you could hang your trophy on the wall! Well, it's not *on* the wall, Captain! It's *in* it!"

Scott added his drop of reality to Kirk's cup of self-castigation. "With the ventilation system cut off, sir, we've air for only two hours."

Human beings with a cause, Kirk thought. You must not look to them for mercy. As though to confirm the thought, McCoy said, "I expect things don't look much brighter to the patients on colony Theta Seven."

Only in Spock, the half human, was there mercy. "May I suggest that we no longer belabor the point of whether or not we should have pursued the creature? The matter has become academic. The creature is now pursuing *us.*"

"Creature, Mr Spock?" said McCoy.

"It turned and attacked, Doctor. Its method was well considered and intelligent."

Kirk spoke very slowly. "I have no joy in being proved right, gentlemen, believe me. It could have been many light years away from us by now. But, instead, it chose to stop here. Why? Why? Why?"

"I must wait, Captain," Spock said. "Until I can make a closer analysis of the creature."

"We have two hours, Mr Spock." Kirk turned to Scott. "Try flushing your radioactive waste into the ventilator system. It might cause some discomfort."

"Aye, sir."

McCoy rose with him. He halted at the door. "Jim, sorry about that few minutes ago. Your decision to go after it was right."

The exoneration should have meant something. It didn't. If you weren't companioned by the condemning thoughts of other people, you were companioned by those of your own conscience. Spock spoke. "Captain," he said, "the creature's ability to throw itself out of time, to desynchronize, allows it to be elsewhere in the instant our phasers strike. There is no basis, then, for your self-recrimination. If you had fired your phaser precisely on time twelve years ago, it would have made no more difference than it did an hour ago. Captain Garrovick would still be dead."

"Theories of guilt, of right or wrong, past and present—I seem to have outgrown them suddenly. Suddenly, Mr Spock, my sole concern is saving my ship and my crew."

The fault was not yours, Captain. There was no fault."

Kirk rose. "If you want to play psychoanalyst—and frankly, it's not your role, Spock—do it with Ensign Garrovick. Not me. Thank you." He left the Briefing Room without a backward glance.

Spock took the hint. He buzzed the door of Garrovick's quarters and walked in. Garrovick leaped to his feet.

"You may be seated, Ensign. I wish to talk to you."

The young face was puzzled. "Yes, sir."

"Ensign, am I correct in my assumption that you have been disturbed by what you consider a failure to behave in the prescribed manner in a moment of stress?"

Garrovick flushed painfully. "Well, I haven't been exactly proud of myself, sir."

"Perhaps you have considered this so-called failure of yours only from the standpoint of your own emotions."

Garrovick shook his head. "No, sir. I've considered the facts, too. And the facts are that men under my command died because I hesitated, because I stopped to analyze instead of acting. My attempt to be logical killed my men, Mr Spock."

"Ensign, self-intolerance is an hereditary trait of your species."

"You make it sound like a disease, sir."

Their eyes, fixed on each other, failed to note the slight wisp of vapor that was filtering out of the jammed ventilator opening. Garrovick made a gesture of impatience. "You're telling me, "Don't worry about it, Ensign! It happens to all of us. We'll just bury the bodies and won't think about them any more.' Isn't that it, Mr Spock?"

"Not quite. You can learn from remorse, Ensign. It changes the human constitution. But guilt is a waste of time. Hate of the self, always undeserved, will ultimately crush you."

Spock paused suddenly, sniffing the air. "Do you smell anything?" he asked. "I thought I scented—" Then he saw the trail of mist drifting from the ventilator.

Garrovick whirled toward it. "Sir, it's the…"

Spock, grabbing his arm, propelled him to the door. "Out of here —fast! I will attempt to seal it off!"

He rushed to the ventilator opening. Seizing the jammed switch, he struggled to close it. But the cloud, full and dense now, was pouring into the room, over him, around him, and finally completely obscuring him.

In the corridor Garrovick raced to a wall communicator. "Captain! The creature! It's in my cabin, sir! It's got Mr Spock!"

Kirk leaped from his chair. "On my way, Garrovick!" He dropped his speaker. "Scotty, reverse pressure, Cabin 341! Lieutenant Uhura, Security to 341! Medical alert!"

He'd given the right orders. In Garrovick's quarters, the creature, pulled by the suction of reversed pressure, was drawn back into the ventilator opening. McCoy, with a Security team, met him outside the door. As McCoy reached to open it, Kirk said, "Wait, Bones! We need a tricorder reading!"

As a guard adjusted his instrument, McCoy cried out, "Jim, Spock may be dying!"

Kirk whirled. "If we release that thing into the ship, he'll have a lot of company!"

Garrovick, ashen, spoke. "It's my fault, sir. I must have jammed the vent control when I hit a cup against it."

Kirk spoke to the guard. "Check if the reverse pressure has pulled it back into the ventilation system!"

"He saved my life, sir," Garrovick said brokenly. "I should be lying dead in there, not him."

Spock's voice came through the door. "I am gratified that neither of us is dead, Ensign." He flung the door open. "The reverse pressure worked, Captain. The vent is closed."

Stunned, Kirk stared at him. "Spock, don't misunderstand my question—but why aren't you dead?"

"That green blood of his!" shouted McCoy.

Spock nodded. "My hemoglobin is based on copper, not iron."

Kirk had moved to the cabin door, sniffing at it. "The scent—it's different. Yes… Yes, I think I understand now."

"You don't really believe you're in communication with the creature, Captain?"

"I'm not sure what it is, Spock. But you remember I said I knew it was alive. Perhaps it's not communication as we understand it, but I did know it was alive and intelligent. Now I know something else."

The wall communicator beeped. "Bridge to Captain Kirk."

Kirk flipped the switch. "Kirk here."

"Scott, sir. The creature's moving back toward the number-two impulse vent. The radioactive flushing may be affecting it."

"Open the vent," Kirk said. "On my way. Kirk out." He was running down the corridor when he hesitated and turned back. "Ensign Garrovick!"

Garrovick hastened to him. "Yes, sir?"

"You were on the bridge when we were attacked."

"I'm sorry, sir. I know I'd been confined to quarters, but when the alert sounded for battle stations, I…"

"Very commendable, Ensign. What was your impression of the battle?"

"I don't understand, sir."

"I'm asking for your military appraisal of the techniques employed against the creature."

Garrovick's jaw firmed. "Ineffective, sir." He added hastily. "I mean, Captain, you did everything possible. It's just that nothing works against a monster that can do what that thing does."

"And what's your appraisal of your conduct back on the planet?"

"I delayed firing."

"And if you had fired on time?" Kirk waited, his eyes on Garrovick's eyes. "It would have made no difference, Ensign. No

weapon known would have made any difference. Then—or twelve years ago."

"Pardon, sir? I don't understand."

"I said, return to duty, Mr Garrovick."

Joy flooded the young face. "Yes, sir. Thank you, Captain."

He was about to add something, but the elevator doors had already closed on Kirk.

There was news awaiting him on the bridge. Chekov, moving aside to surrender Spock's station to him, spoke eagerly. "Results positive, Captain. The creature has left the ship at high warp speed and is already out of scanner range."

Kirk had joined Spock at his station. "Direction, Mr Spock?"

"Bearing was 127, mark 9. But I've already lost it now, sir."

Kirk switched on the intercom. "Scotty. I'm going to want all the speed you can deliver. Stick with it until we begin to shake apart. Kirk out." He turned to Spock. "I believe I know where it's going."

"It has changed course before to mislead us, sir. Logic would dictate that—"

"I'm playing intuition instead of logic, Mr Spock. Mr Chekov, compute a course for the Tychos Star System."

Heads snapped around. Controlling his surprise, Chekov punched in the course. "Computed and on the board, sir."

"Ahead full."

"Ahead full, sir."

"Lieutenant Uhura, contact the U.S.S. *Yorktovon* and Starfleet. Inform both that we're pursuing the creature to planet 4 of that System. It's the location of its attack on the U.S.S. *Farragut* twelve years ago."

Spock said, "I don't understand, Captain."

"Remember when I said that the scent of the creature was somehow different? Something in my mind then said, 'birth… divide… multiply.' It said 'home'."

Spock's eyebrows went up. "And you know where "home' is, Captain?"

"Yes. Home is where it fought a Starship once before. Lieutenant Uhura, give them our tactical situation. Tell them that I am committing this vessel to the creature's destruction. We will rendezvous with the *Yorktown*—" He turned to Chekov. "Round trip, Mr Chekov?"

"One point seven days, sir."

"Lieutenant Uhura, we will rendezvous with the *Yorktown* in forty-eight hours."

Planet 4 of the Tychos Star System was a strangely dull, lifeless-looking one. On the bridge McCoy eyed its viewer image with distaste. He spoke to Spock. "I assume you also think we should pursue this creature and destroy it."

"Definitely, Doctor."

"You don't agree with us, Bones?"

McCoy shrugged. "It's a mother. I don't happen to enjoy destroying mothers."

Spock said, "If the creature is about to spawn, it will undoubtedly reproduce by fission, not just in two parts but thousands."

Kirk glanced at him. "Anti-matter seems to be our only possibility then."

Spock nodded. "An ounce should be sufficient. We can drain it out of our engines, transport it to the planet in a magnetic vacuum field."

Garrovick had taken up a position beside Kirk's chair. "Ensign, contact medical stores. I want as much hemoplasm as they can spare. And I want it in the Transporter Room in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, sir."

"You intend to use the hemoplasm to attract the creature?" McCoy asked.

"We have to lure it to the anti-matter. As it's attracted by red blood cells, what better bait can we have?"

"There remains one problem, Captain."

Kirk nodded at Spock. "The blast."

"Exactly. A matter-anti-matter blast will rip half the planet's atmosphere away. If our ship is still in orbit, and encounters those —shock waves…"

"We'll have to take that chance." Spock said, "No one can guarantee our Transporter will operate under such conditions. If a man is beaming up when that blast hits, we may lose him, Captain."

Garrovick who had returned was listening intently. He flushed as Kirk said, "That's why I've decided to set the trap myself, Mr Spock."

Spock got up. "Captain, I have so little hemoglobin in my blood the creature would not be able to harm me extensively. It would seem logical for me to be the one who—"

"Negative, Mr Spock. I want you on board in case this fails. In that case another plan will have to be devised."

"Captain," Spock persisted, "it will require two men to transport the anti-matter unit."

"Sir," Garrovick said. "Sir, I request permission to go with you."

Kirk regarded him speculatively. Then he nodded. "Yes," he said. "I had you in mind, Mr Garrovick."

Desolation—a brittle world of death was the world of the creature, its surface scarred and blackened by lava fissures, the hideous corrugations of dead volcanoes. As they materialized on it, Kirk and Garrovick staggered under the burden of the anti-matter unit, their anti-gravs tight on the brilliant metal sphere suspended between them. The hemoplasm container took form beside them. The moment he found secure footage on his lava ridge, Kirk freed a hand to open his communicator.

"Kirk to *Enterprise.*"

"Spock here, Captain."

"Proceed immediately to maximum distant orbit, Mr Spock."

"Yes, sir."

Garrovick said, "this is the ultimate, sir. Less than an ounce of anti-matter here… and yet more power than ten thousand cobalt bombs."

Kirk nodded. "A pound of it would destroy a whole solar system. I hope it's as powerful as man is allowed to get."

There was a small rise in front of them. Leaving the hemoplasm where it lay, they carefully positioned the anti-matter container on the little hillock of flattened lava.

"Detonator," Kirk said.

Garrovick handed him a small device. Moving with utmost care, Kirk attached it to the container. Then, with the flick of a switch, he armed it. That done, he reopened his communicator.

"Kirk to *Enterprise.*"

"Spock here, Captain. Holding at thirty thousand kilometers."

"Anti-matter container positioned and armed. I'll call back when I've baited it Kirk out."

"Captain! Look!"

The vaporous thing had fully emerged from a lava fissure and was flowing over the hemoplasm, ingesting it. "The hemoplasm!" Garrovick cried. "The bait's already gone!"

Kirk straightened. "We'll have to use something else."

"But it only feeds on blood!"

Kirk's older eyes met the younger ones. "Transport back to the ship, Ensign. Tell them to prepare to detonate."

Garrovick was aghast. "You, sir? *You're* going to be the bait?"

"You heard your order. Get back to the ship!"

Garrovick didn't respond. He looked again toward the creature. Gorged on the hemoplasm, it was still hovering over the container. Then, very slowly, it began to move toward the two humans.

Kirk grabbed Garrovick's arm, and swung him around. I gave you an order!" he shouted.

"Yes, sir." He took out his communicator; and starting to walk slowly past Kirk, prepared to give beam-up instructions. Then, without warning, he whirled and struck Kirk with a sharp karate chop on the back of the neck. Kirk fell. Garrovick, glancing quickly toward the creature, stooped to pick up Kirk's body. Kirk lashed out with a kick that threw Garrovick off-balance. He stumbled and Kirk jumped to his feet.

"Ensign, consider yourself on report! We don't have time in this service for heroics. I have no intention of sacrificing myself. Come on!" He yanked Garrovick into a position that placed the anti-matter unit between them and the creature. Then he opened his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterpriser*

"Spock, Captain."

"Scan us, Spock and lock onto us. It's going to be very close. Stand by." He looked back. The creature was almost on him, a thin tentacle of mist drifting toward his throat.

"I—I can smell it, Captain. It's sickly… honey sweet."

"Stand by, *Enterprise,*" Kirk said. He saw that the creature, seeking blood in the anti-matter unit, was flowing over the metal sphere. Shouting into his communicator, he cried, *"Now Energize! And detonate!*"

Their bodies went into shimmer, fading. Then the world of the creature blew up.

In the Transporter Room of the *Enterprise,* Spock saw the forms of Kirk and Garrovick begin to take shape. They held it only for a fleeting second before they dissolved once more into shining

fragments. Spock's steady hands worked at the controls, adjusting them. Scott, panic-stricken, flung himself at the Transporter console. McCoy yelled, "Don't just stand there! For God's sake, *do* something!"

Chekov spoke over the intercom. "All decks, stand by. Shock waves!"

The Transporter Room rocked crazily. Spock and Scott, flung to their knees, struggled desperately to stay with the console controls. Then they both looked over at the Transporter chamber. It was empty.

Spock said, "Cross-circuit to B, Mr Scott."

McCoy uttered a literal howl. "*What a crazy way to travel! Spilling a man's molecules all over the damned universe!*

Scott said, "Picking it up… I think we're picking them up."

McCoy looked away from the empty Transporter chamber. When he found what it took to look back, two forms were again assuming shape and substance. Kirk and Garrovick stepped from the platform—whole, unharmed.

Scott sank down over the console. "Captain," he said as though to himself. "Captain." He sighed. "Thank God."

Spock was reproving. There was no deity involved, Mr Scott. It was my cross-circuit to selector B that recovered them."

McCoy eyed Spock with disgust. "Well, thank pitchforks and pointed ears, then! As long as they worked!"

Kirk used his communicator. "Captain Kirk to bridge."

"Chekov here, Captain."

"Lay a course for the *Yorktown* rendezvous, Mr Chekov. Maximum warp."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk smiled at Garrovick. "Come to my cabin when you've cleaned up, Ensign. I want to tell you about your father. Several stories I think you'll like to hear."

Garrovick looked at him, adoration in his eyes.

Thank you, sir. I will"

THE IMMUNITY SYNDROME

(Robert Sabaroff)

White beaches… suntanned women… mountains, their trout streams just asking for it… the lift of a surfboard to a breaking wave… familiar tree-shapes—that was shore leave on Starbase Six. And the exhausted crew of the *Enterprise* was on its way to it, unbelievably nearing it at long last. Kirk, remembering the taste of an open-air breakfast of rainbow trout, turned to give Sulu his final approach orders.

"Message from the base, sir," Uhura called. "Heavy interference. All I could get was the word *'Intrepid'* and what sounded like a sector coordinate."

"Try them on another channel, Lieutenant."

McCoy said, "The *Intrepid* is manned by Vulcans only, isn't it, Jim?"

"I believe so." Kirk swung his chair around. "The crew of the *Intrepid* is Vulcan, isn't it, Mr Spock? I seem to remember the Starship was made entirely Vulcan as a tribute to the skill of your people in arranging that truce with the Romulan Federation. It was an unusual honor."

Spock didn't answer. He didn't turn. But he'd straightened in his chair. Something in the movement disturbed Kirk. He got up and went over to the library-computer station. "Mr Spock!" Still Spock sat, unmoving, silent. Kirk shook his shoulder. "Spock, what's wrong? Are you in pain?"

"The *Intrepid* is dead. I just felt it die."

Kirk looked at McCoy. McCoy shook his head, shrugging.

"Mr Spock, you're tired," Kirk said. "Let Chekov take over your station."

"And the four hundred Vulcans aboard her are dead," Spock said.

McCoy said, "Come down to Sickbay, Spock."

Stone-faced, Spock said, "I am quite all right, Doctor. I know what I feel."

Kirk said, "Report to Sickbay, Mr Spock. That's an order."

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk watched them move to the elevator. They'd all had it. Too many missions. Even Spock's superb stamina had its breaking point. Too many rough missions—and Vulcan logic itself could turn morbidly visionary. It was high time for shore leave.

"Captain, I have Starbase Six now," Uhura said.

Back in his chair, Kirk flipped a switch. "Kirk here. Go ahead."

The bridge speaker spoke. "The last reported position of the Starship *Intrepid* was sector three nine J. You will divert immediately."

Kirk rubbed a hand over his chin before he reached for his own speaker. "The *Enterprise* has just completed the last of several very strenuous missions. The crew is tired. We're on our way for R and R. There must be another Starship in that sector."

"Negative. This is a rescue priority order. We have lost all contact with solar system Gamma Seven A. The *Intrepid* was investigating. Contact has now been lost with the *Intrepid.* Report progress."

"Order acknowledged," Kirk said. "Kirk out."

Sulu was staring at him in questioning dismay. Kirk snapped, "You heard the order, Mr Sulu. Lay in a course for Gamma Seven A."

Chekov spoke from his console. Awe subdued his voice.

"Solar System Gamma Seven A is dead, Captain. My long-range scan of it shows—"

"Dead? What are you saying, Mr Chekov? That is a fourth-magnitude star! Its system supports billions of inhabitants! Check your readings!"

"I have, sir. Gamma Seven A is dead."

In Sickbay Spock was saying, "I assure you, Doctor, I am quite all right. The pain was momentary."

McCoy sighed as he took his last diagnostic reading. "My instruments appear to agree with you if I can trust them with a crazy Vulcan anatomy. By the way, how can you be so sure the *Intrepid* is destroyed?"

"I felt it die," his patient said tonelessly.

"But I thought you had to be in physical contact with a subject to sense—"

"Dr McCoy, even I, a half Vulcan, can sense the death screams of four hundred Vulcan minds crying out over distance between us."

McCoy shook his head. "It's beyond me."

Spock was shouldering back into his shirt. "I have noticed this insensitivity among wholly human beings. It is easier for you to feel the death of one fellow-creature than to feel the deaths of millions."

"Suffer the deaths of thy neighbors, eh, Spock? Is that what you want to wish on us?"

"It might have rendered your history a bit less bloody."

The intercom beeped. "Kirk here. Bones, is Spock all right? If he is, I need him on the bridge."

"Coming, Captain." Kirk met him at the elevator. "You may have been right. Contact with the *Intrepid* has been lost. It has also been lost with an entire solar system. Our scans show that Gamma Seven A is a dead star system."

"That is considerable news." Spock hurried over to his station and Kirk spoke to Uhura. "Any update from Starfleet?"

"I can't filter out the distortions. They're getting worse, sir."

A red light flashed on Sulu's panel. "Captain, the deflector shields just snapped on!"

"Slow down to warp three!" Kirk walked back to Spock. The Vulcan straightened from his stoop over his computer. "Indications of energy turbulence ahead, sir. Unable to analyze. I have never encountered such readings before."

The drama latent in the statement was so uncharacteristic of Spock that Kirk whirled to the main viewing screen. "Magnification factor three on screen!" he ordered.

Star-filled space—the usual vista. "Scan sector," he said. The starfield merely revealed itself from another angle and Sulu said, "Just what are we looking for, Captain?"

"I would assume," Spock said, *"that."*

A black shadow, roughly circular, had appeared on the screen.

"An interstellar dust cloud," Chekov suggested.

Kirk shook his head. "The stars have disappeared. They could be seen through a dust cloud, Mr Chekov. How do you read it, Mr Spock?"

"Analysis still eludes me, Captain. Sensors are feeding data to computers now. But whatever that dark zone is, my calculations place it directly on the course that would have brought it into contact with the *Intrepid* and the Gamma Seven A system."

"Are you saying it caused their deaths, Mr Spock?"

"A possibility, Captain."

After a moment, Kirk nodded. "Hold present course but slow to warp factor one," he told Sulu. "Mr Chekov, prepare to launch telemetry probe into that zone."

"Aye, sir." Chekov moved controls on his console. "Probe ready. Switching data feed to library-computer."

"Launch probe," Kirk said.

Chekov shoved a stud. "Probe launched."

An ear-shattering blast of static burst from the communications station. Its noise swelled into a crackling roar so fierce that it seemed to possess a physical substance—the substance and force of a giant's slap. It ended as abruptly as it had come. Uhura, dizzy, disoriented, was clinging to her chair.

"And what channel did *that* come in on?" Kirk said.

She had to make a visible effort to answer. "Telemetry… the channel from the probe, sir. There's no signal… at all now…"

"Mr Spock, speculations?"

"I have none, Captain." Then Spock had leaped from his chair. Uhura, her arms dropped, limp, was slumped over her console. "Lieutenant!" He reached an arm around her, steadying her. "*Dizzy,*" she whispered. "I'll… be all right in a minute."

The intercom beeped to McCoy's voice. "Jim, half the women on this ship have fainted. Reports in from all decks."

Kirk glanced at Uhura. "Maybe you'd better check Lieutenant Uhura. She just pulled out of a faint."

"Unless she's out now, keep her up there. I've got an emergency here."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing organic. Just weakness, nervousness."

"Can you handle it?"

"I can give them stimulants to keep them on their feet."

A tired crew—and now this. Kirk looked at the screen. It offered no cheer. The black shadow now owned almost all of the screen. Hold position here, Mr Sulu." He got up from his chair—and was hit

by an attack of vertigo. He fought it down. "Mr Spock, I want an update on that shadow ahead of us."

"No analysis, sir. Insufficient information."

Kirk smacked the computer console. "Mr Spock. I have asked you three times for data on that thing and you have been unable to supply it. 'Insufficient information' won't do. It is your responsibility to deliver sufficient information at all times."

"I am aware of that, sir. But there is nothing in the computer banks on this phenomenon. It is beyond all previous experience."

Kirk looked at the hand that had struck Spock's console. "Weakness, nervousness." He was guilty on both counts. Even Spock couldn't elicit data from the computer banks that hadn't been put into them. "Sorry, Mr Spock. Something seems to be infecting the entire ship. Let's go for reverse logic. If you can't tell me what that zone of darkness is, tell me what it isn't."

"It is not gaseous, liquid nor solid, despite the fact we can't see through it. It is not a galactic nebula like the Coal Sack. As it has activated our deflector shields, it seems to consist of some energy form—but none that the sensors can identify."

"And you said it is possible it killed the *Intrepid* and that solar system?"

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk turned to Uhura. "Lieutenant, inform Starfleet of our position and situation. Relay all relative information from computer banks." He paused. "Tell them we intend to probe further into the zone of darkness to gain further information."

"Yes, sir."

As he started back to his chair, he swayed under another wash of dizziness. Spock moved to him quickly and he clung for a moment to the muscular arm. "Thank you, Mr Spock," he said. "I can make it now." He reached his chair. "Distance to the zone of darkness, Mr Sulu?"

"One hundred thousand kilometers."

"Slow ahead, Mr Sulu. Impulse power."

His head was still whirling. "Distance now, Mr Sulu?"

"We penetrate the zone in one minute seven seconds, sir."

"Mr Chekov, red alert. Stand by, phasers. Full power to deflector shields."

"Phasers standing by—deflectors at full power, sir."

Sound was emitted. It came slowly at first—and not from the communications station. It came from everywhere; and as it built,

its mounting tides of invisible shock waves reached everywhere. Their reverberations struck through the metal walls of the engineering section, rushing Scott to check his equipment. Horrified by his readings, he ran to his power levers to test them. Then, mercifully, the all-pervading racket subsided. Up on the bridge, bis hands still pressed to his ears, Sulu cried, "Captain—the screen!"

Blackness, total, had claimed it.

"Malfunction, Mr Spock?"

"No, Captain. All systems working."

Kirk shook his head, trying to clear it. Around him people were still clutching at console rails for support. Kirk struck the intercom button. "Bones, things any better in Sickbay?"

"Worse. They're backed up into the corridor."

"Got anything that will help up here? I don't want anyone on the bridge folding at a critical moment."

"On my way. McCoy out."

Kirk pushed the intercom button again. "Kirk to Engineering. The power's dropped, Mr Scott! What's happened?"

"We've lost five points of our energy reserve. The deflector shields have been weakened."

"Can you compensate, Scotty?"

"Yes, if we don't lose any more. Don't ask me how it happened."

Kirk spoke sharply. "I *am* asking you, mister. I need answers!"

McCoy's answer was an air-hypo. He hurried into the bridge with a nurse. As Kirk accepted the hissing injection, McCoy said, "It's a stimulant, Jim." As he adjusted the hypo for Sulu's shot, Kirk said, "Just how bad is it, Bones?"

"Two thirds of personnel are affected."

"This is a sick ship, Bones. We're picking up problems faster than we can solve them. It's as though we were in the middle of some creeping paralysis."

"Maybe we are," McCoy said. He left the command chair to continue his round with the hypo. Kirk got up to go to the computer station. "Mr Spock, any analysis of that last noise outburst—the one that started to lose us power?"

Spock nodded. "The sound was the turbulence caused by our penetration of a boundary layer."

"What sort of boundary layer?"

"I don't know, Captain."

"Boundary between what and what?"

"Between where we were and where we are." At Kirk's stare, he went on. "I still have no specifics, sir. But we seem to have entered an area of energy that is not compatible with life or mechanical processes. As we move on, the source of it will grow stronger—and we will grow weaker."

"Recommendations?"

McCoy spoke. "I recommend survival, Jim. Let's get out of here." He turned and walked to the elevator, the nurse behind him.

Kirk faced around to the questioning faces. And Starbase had demanded a "progress" report. Progress to what? The fate of the *Intrepid*—the billions of lives that had once breathed on Gamma Seven A? Bureaucracy… evasion by comfortable chairs.

He walked slowly back to his uncomfortable chair. The intercom button—yes. "This is the Captain speaking," he said. "We have entered an area that is unfamiliar to us. All hands were tired to begin with and we've all sustained something of a shock. But we've had stimulants. Our deflectors are holding. We've got a good ship. And we know what our mission is. Let's get on with the job. Kirk out."

His own intercom button beeped. "Sickbay to Captain."

"Kirk. Go ahead, Bones."

Before he went ahead, McCoy glanced at the semiconscious Yeoman lying on his diagnostic couch. "Jim, one after another… life energy levels… my indicators…"

Kirk spoke quietly. "Say it, Bones."

"We are dying," McCoy said. "My life monitors show that we are all, each one of us, dying."

The sweat of his own weakness broke from Kirk's pores. He could feel it run cold down his chest.

But the ordeal of the *Enterprise* had just begun. Kirk, down in Engineering, was flung against a mounded dynamo at a sudden lurch of the ship. "And that? What was that, Mr Scott?"

"An accident, sir. We went into reverse."

"Reverse? That was a *forward* lurch! How could that occur in reverse thrust?"

"I don't know, sir. All I know is that our power levels are draining steadily. They're down to twelve percent. I've never experienced anything like it before."

Spock came in on the intercom. "Captain, we are accelerating. The zone of darkness is pulling us toward it."

"Pulling us? How, Mr Spock?"

"I don't know. However, I suggest that Mr Scott give us reverse power."

"Mr Spock, he just *gave* us reverse power!"

"Then I reverse my suggestion, sir. Ask him to apply a forward thrust."

"Mr Scott, you heard that. Let's try the forward thrust."

The Engineering Chief shook his head. "I don't know, sir. It contradicts all the rules of logic."

"Logic is Mr Spock's specialty."

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Nudge it slowly into forward thrust, Mr Scott."

Scott carefully advanced three controls. Eyeing his instruments anxiously, he relaxed. "That did it, Captain. We're slowing now. But the forward movement hasn't stopped. We're still being pulled ahead."

"Keep applying the forward thrust against the pull. Have one of your men monitor these instruments."

Instruments in Sickbay were being monitored, too. Nurse Chapel, watching her life function indicators, called, "Doctor, they're showing another sharp fall." McCoy, whirling to look, muttered, "Stimulants. How long can we keep them up?" He was checking the panel when Kirk's voice came from the intercom. "This is the Captain speaking. All department heads will report to the Briefing Room in ten minutes. They will come with whatever information gathered on this zone of darkness we are in."

McCoy took his gloom with him to the Briefing Room. Slamming some tape cartridges down on the table, he said, "My sole contribution is the fact that the further we move into this zone of darkness, the weaker our life functions get. I have no idea why." Reaching for a chair, he staggered slightly.

"Bones…"

He waved the solicitude aside. "I'm all right. All those stimulants —they catch up with you."

Scott spoke. "As far as the power levels are concerned, everything's acting backwards. But the drain is continuing. And we're still being dragged forward."

"Mr Spock?" Kirk said.

"I am assuming that something within the zone absorbs both biological and mechanical energy. It would appear to be the same thing that sucked energy from an entire solar system—and the Starship *Intrepid.*"

"Some *thing,* Mr Spock? Not the zone itself?"

"I would say not, Captain. Analysis of the zone suggests it is a negative energy field, however illogical that may sound. *But it is not the source of the power drains.*"

"A shield, then," Kirk said. "An outer layer of protection for something else."

"But what?" Scott said.

"It's pulling the life out of us, whatever it is," McCoy grunted.

"We'll find out what it is," Kirk said. "But first we have to get out of here ourselves." He leaned across the table. "Mr Scott, forward thrust slowed down our advance before. If you channel all warp and impulse power into one massive forward thrust, it might snap us out of the zone."

Scott's face lightened. "Aye, Captain. I'll reserve enough for the shields in case we don't get out."

Spock's voice was as expressionless as his face. "I submit, Mr Scott, that if we do not get out, the shields would merely prolong our wait for death."

Kirk regarded him somberly. "Yes. You will apply all power as needed to get us out of here, Mr Scott. Report to your stations, everybody, and continue your research. Dismissed."

As they left, he remained seated, head bowed on his hand. At the door Spock stopped, and came back to stand, waiting, at the table. Kirk looked up at him. "The *Intrepid's* crew would have done all these things, Captain," Spock said. "They were destroyed." Kirk drummed his fingers on the table. "They may not have done all these things. You've just told us what an illogical situation this is."

"True, sir. It is also true that they never discovered what killed them."

"How can you know that?"

"Vulcan has not been conquered within its collective memory. It is a memory that goes so far back no Vulcan can any longer conceive of a conqueror. I know the ship was defeated because I sensed its death."

"What was it exactly you felt, Mr Spock?"

"Astonishment. Profound astonishment."

"My Vulcan friend," Kirk said. He got up. "Let's get back to the bridge."

Engineering was calling him as they came out of the elevator. Hurrying to his chair, Kirk pushed the intercom stud. "Kirk here, Scotty."

"We've completed arrangements, sir. I'm ready to try it when you are."

"We've got the power to pull it off?"

The voice was glum. "I hope so, Captain."

"Stand by, Scotty." He pushed another button. "All hands, this is the Captain speaking. An unknown force is pulling us deeper into the zone of darkness. We will apply all available power in one giant forward thrust in the hope it will yank us out of the zone. Prepare yourselves for a big jolt." He buzzed Engineering. "Ready, Mr Scott. Let's get on with it. *Now!*"

They were prepared for the jolt. And it was big. But what they weren't prepared for was the violently accelerating lunge that followed the jolt. Scott and a crewman crashed against a rear wall. McCoy and Christine Chapel were sent reeling back through two sections of Sickbay. In the bridge an African plant nurtured by Uhura flew through the air to smash against the elevator door. People were hurled bodily over the backs of their chairs. There was another fierce lurch of acceleration. The ship tossed like a rearing horse. Metal screamed. Lights faded. Finally, the *Enterprise* steadied.

From the floor where he'd been tumbled, Kirk looked at the screen.

Failure. The starless black still possessed it.

Weary, bruised, Kirk hauled himself back into his chair. The question had to be asked. He asked it. "Mr Scott, are we still losing power?"

"Aye, sir. All we did was to pull away a bit. The best we can do now is maintain thrust against the pull to hold our distance."

"How long do we have?"

"At this rate of drain plus the draw on all systems—two hours, Captain."

As Kirk got to his feet, another wave of weakness swept over him. It passed—and he moved over to the computer station. "We're trying to hold our distance, Mr Spock. Have you yet ascertained what we are holding the distance *from?*"

Spock, his eyes on his own screen, said, "I have not found out what that thing is, Captain. But it seems to have found us."

Kirk wheeled to the bridge viewer. In the center of its blackness a bright object had become visible—bright, pulsating, elongated.

Staring at it, Kirk said, "Mr Chekov, prepare to launch a probe."

Bent to his hooded computer, Spock said, "Very confused readings, Captain—but that object is definitely the source of the energy drains."

"Mr Chekov, launch probe," Kirk said.

"Probe launched, sir. Impact in seven point three seconds."

Without order Sulu began the countdown. "Six, five… four… three… two… one… *now!*"

The ship trembled. Lights bunked. But that was all.

"Mr Chekov, do we still have contact with the probe?"

"Yes, sir. Data being relayed to Mr Spock."

"Mr Spock?"

The Vulcan's head was hidden under the computer's mound. "Readings coming in now, Captain. Length, approximately eleven thousand miles. Varying in width from two thousand to three thousand miles. Outer layer strewn with space debris and other wastes. Interior consists of protoplasm varying from a firmer gelatinous layer to a semi-fluid central mass."

He withdrew his head from the computer. "Condition… living."

The faces around Kirk were stunned. He looked away from them and back at Spock. "Living," he said. Then, his voice very quiet, he said, "Magnification four, Mr Sulu. On the main screen."

He had expected a horror—and he received it. The screen held what might be a nightmare of some child who had played with a lab microscope—a monstrous, amoebalike protozoan. The gigantic nucleus throbbed, its chromosome bodies vaguely shadowed under its gelatinous, spotted skin. In open loathing, Kirk shut his eyes. But he could not dispel his searing memory of what continued to show on the screen.

In Sickbay's lab, McCoy was parading a pictured series of one-celled creatures. On the small view-screen a paramecium, its cilia wriggling, came and went. Then McCoy said, "This is an amoeba."

If life was movement, ingestion, the thing was alive, a microscopic inhabitant of stagnant pools. As Kirk watched, a

pseudopod extended itself, groping but intent on a fragment of food. There was a blind greed in the creature that sickened Kirk.

"I've seen them before," he said. "Like that, enlarged by microscope. But this thing out there is eleven thousand miles long! Are you saying that anything so huge is a single-celled animal?"

"For lack of a better term, Jim. Huge as it is, it is a very simple form of life. And it can perform all the functions necessary to qualify it as a living organism. It can reproduce, receive sense impressions, act on them, and eat, though what its diet is I wouldn't know."

"Energy," Spock said. "Energy drained from us. I would speculate that this unknown life form is invading the galaxy like an infection."

"Mr Spock, the *Intrepid* died of this particular infection. Why have we survived so long?'

"The *Intrepid* must have come upon it when it was hungry, low in energy. We are not safe, Captain. We merely have a little more time than the *Intrepid* had."

"Bones, this zone of darkness. Does the thing generate it itself as some form of protection?"

"That's one of the things we have to find out, Jim. We need a closer look at it."

"The closer to it we get, the faster it eats our energy. We're barely staying alive at this distance from it."

McCoy shut off his screen. "We could risk the shuttlecraft. With special shielding, it might—"

"I'm not sending anybody anywhere near that thing! Unmanned probes will give us the information we need to destroy it."

"I must differ with you, Captain," Spock said. "We have sent probes into it. They have told us some facts but not those we need to know. We're in no position to expend the power to take blind shots at it. We need a target."

McCoy said, "One man could go in… pinpoint its vulnerable spots."

"And the odds against his coming back?" Kirk cried. "How can I order anyone to take such a chance?"

"Who mentioned orders?" McCoy demanded. "You've got yourself a volunteer, Jim, my boy. I've already done the preliminary work."

"Bones, it's a suicide mission!"

"Doctor, this thing has reflexes. The unmanned probe stung it when it entered. The lurch we felt was the turbulence of its reaction."

"All right, Spock," McCoy said. "Then I'll have the sense to go slow when I penetrate it."

Spock studied him. "There is a latent martyr in you, Doctor. It is an affliction that disqualifies you to undertake the mission."

"Martyr?" McCoy yelled. "You think I intend to bypass the chance to get into the greatest living laboratory ever?"

"The *Intrepid* carried physicians and psychologists, Doctor. They died."

"Just because Vulcans failed doesn't mean a human will."

Kirk hit the table with his fist. "Will you both kindly shut up? I've told you! I'm not taking volunteers!"

"You don't think you're going, do you?" McCoy shouted.

"I am a command pilot!" Kirk said. "And as such, I am the qualified person. So let's have an end of this!"

"You have just *disqualified* yourself, Captain," Spock said. "As the command pilot you are indispensable. Nor are you the scientific specialist which I am."

McCoy glared at Spock. "Jim, that organism contains chemical processes we've never seen before and may never, let's hope, see again. We could learn more in one day than—"

"We don't have a day," Kirk said. "We have precisely one hour and thirty-five minutes. Then all our power is exhausted."

"Jim…"

"Captain…"

Kirk whirled on them both. "*I* will decide who can best serve the success of this mission! When I have made my command decision —command decision, gentlemen—you will be notified."

He turned on his heel and left them.

The solitude of his quarters felt good. He closed the door behind him, unhooked his belt and with his back turned to the clock's face deliberately stretched himself out on his bunk. Relax. Let the quiet move up, inch by inch, from his feet to his throbbing head. *Let go.* If you could just let go, answers sometimes welled up from an untapped wisdom that resisted pushing. "God, let me relax," Kirk prayed.

It was true. He *was* indispensable. There was no room in command authority for the heroics of phony modesty. As to Bones, he *did* have the medical-biological advantages he'd claimed. But

Spock, the born athlete, the physical-fitness fanatic, the Vulcan logician and Science Officer, was both physically and emotionally better suited to withstand the stresses of such a mission. Yet who could know what invaluable discoveries Bones might make if he got his chance to make them? So it was up to him—Kirk. The choice was his. One of his friends had to be condemned to probable death. Which one?

He drew a long shuddering breath. Then he reached out to the intercom over his head and shoved its button. "This is the Captain speaking. Dr McCoy and Mr Spock report to my quarters at once. Kirk out."

The beep came as he sat up. "Engineering to Captain Kirk."

"Go ahead, Scotty."

"You wanted to be kept informed of the power drain, sir. All levels have sunk to fifty percent. Still draining. We can maintain power for another hour and fifteen minutes."

"Right, Scotty." He drew a hand over the bunk's coverlet, stared at the hand, and said, "Prepare the shuttlecraft for launching."

"What's that, sir?"

"You heard me, Scotty, Dr McCoy will tell you what special equipment to install. Kirk out."

Of course. The knock on his door. He got up and opened it. They were both standing there, their mutual antagonism weaving back and forth between them. "Come in, gentlemen." There was no point, no time for suspense. "I'm sorry, Mr Spock," Kirk said heavily.

McCoy flashed a look of triumph at Spock. "Well, done, Jim," he said. "I'll get the last few things I need and—"

Kirk stopped him in midstride. "Not you, Bones." He turned to Spock. "I'm sorry, Spock. I am sorry you are the best qualified to go."

Spock nodded briefly. He didn't speak as he passed the crushed McCoy.

The door to the hangar-deck elevator slid open. Spock moved aside to allow McCoy to precede him out of it. "Do not suffer so, Doctor. Professional credentials are very valuable. But superior resistance to strain has occasionally proved more valuable."

"Nothing has been proven yet!" McCoy controlled himself with an effort. "My DNA code analyzer will give you the fundamental

structure of the organism. You'll need readings on three light wavelengths from the enzyme recorder,"

"I am familiar with the equipment, Doctor. Time is passing. The shuttlecraft is ready."

"You just won't let me share in this at all, will you, Spock?"

"This is not a competition, Doctor. Kindly grant me my own kind of dignity."

"Vulcan dignity? How can I grant you what I don't understand?"

"Then employ one of your human superstitions. Wish me luck, Dr McCoy."

McCoy gave him a startled look. Without rejoinder, he shoved the button that opened the hangar-deck door. Beyond them the metallic skin of the chosen shuttlecraft gleamed dimly. Two technicians busied themselves with it, making some final arrangements. Spock, without looking back, walked through the hangar door. McCoy saw him climb into the craft. Then the door slid closed; McCoy, alone, muttered, "Good luck, Spock, damn you."

Kirk, on the bridge, waited. Then Sulu turned. "All systems clear for shuttlecraft launch, sir."

It was time to say the words. "Launch shuttlecraft."

The light winked on Sulu's console. Spock was on his way. Alone. In space, alone. Committed—given over to what he, his Captain, had given him over to. Kirk heard the elevator whoosh open. McCoy came out of it. Kirk didn't turn. He said, "Lieutenant Uhura, channel telemetry directly to Mr Chekov at the computer station."

The bridge speaker spoke. "Shuttlecraft to *Enterprise.*"

"Report, Mr Spock."

"The power drain is enormous and growing worse." Static crackled. "I am diverting all secondary power systems to the shields. I will continue communications as long as there is power to transmit."

Spock would be huddled now, Kirk knew, over the craft's control panel. He'd be busy shutting off power systems. Somehow Scott had suddenly materialized beside his command chair. "Captain! He won't have power enough to get back if he diverts it to his shields!"

"Spock," Kirk began.

"I heard, Captain. We recognized that probability earlier. But you will need information communicated."

"When do you estimate penetration?"

"In one point three minutes. Brace yourselves. The area of penetration will no doubt be sensitive."

What was Spock's screen showing? What was his closeup like? The details of the debris-mottled membrane, the enlarging granular structure of the protoplasm under it, two thousand miles thick?

"Contact in six seconds," Spock's voice said.

A tremor shook the *Enterprise.* That meant the massive shock of impact for the shuttlecraft. Its lights would dim, alone in the dimness inside the thing. Kirk seized the microphone.

"Report, Mr Spock."

Silence reported. Had Spock already lost consciousness? The organism would try to dislodge the craft. It would convulse, its convulsions sending its painful intruder into a spinning vortex of repeated shocks.

"Spock…"

The voice came, weak now. "I am undamaged, Captain… relay to Mr Scott… I had three percent power reserve… before the shields stabilized. I… will proceed with my tests… The voice faded… then it returned. "Dr McCoy… you would not… have survived this…"

Kirk saw that McCoy's eyes were moist. "You wanna bet, Spock?" His voice broke on the name.

"I am… moving very slowly now—establishing course toward… the nucleus."

Chekov,… white-faced, called from the computer. "Sir, Mr Spock has reduced his life support systems to bare minimum. I suppose to maintain communications."

Kirk's hand was wet on his microphone. "Spock, save your power for the shields."

Static sputtered from the microphone. Between its cracklings, words could be heard. "My… calculations indicate—shields… only forty-seven minutes." More obliterating static. It quieted. "Identified… Chromosome structure. Changes in it… reproduction process about to begin…"

Ashen, McCoy cried, "Then there'll be *two* of these things!"

"Spock…"

Kirk got an earful of static. He waited. 'I… am having… some difficulty… ship control."

Kirk looked away from the pain in McCoy's face. He waited again. As though it were warning of its waning usefulness, the mike spoke in jagged phrases. "? losing voice contact… transmitting… here are internal coordinates… chromosome bodies…"

Uhura turned from her console. "Contact lost, sir. But I got the coordinates."

"Captain!" It was Chekov. "The shuttlecraft shields are breaking! Fluctuations of energy inside the organism."

"Aye," Scott said. "It's time he got out of there." There was nobody to look at but himself, Kirk thought. He was the man who had sent his best friend to death. He had sent Spock out to suffocate in the foul entrails of a primordial freak. That was a truth to somehow be lived with for the rest of his life. His chair lurched under him. The ship gave a shudder. Numbly, Kirk righted himself. Then, suddenly, in a blast of realization, *he* knew. "Bones!" The word tore from him in a shout. "He's alive! He's still alive! He made the craft kick the thing to force it to squirm—and let us know!"

Uhura spoke. "Captain, I'm getting telemetry."

"Mr Chekov—telemetry analysis as it comes in."

McCoy was still brooding on what reproduction of the organism meant. "According to Spock's telemetry analysis, there are forty chromosomes in that nucleus ready to divide." He paused. "If the energy of this thing merely doubles, everybody and everything within a light year of it will be dead." He paced the length of the bridge and came back "Soon there will be two of it, four, eight, and more—a promise of a combined anti-life force that could encompass the entire galaxy."

"That's what Spock knows, Bones. He knows. He knows we have no choice but to try and destroy it when he transmitted those coordinates of the chromosomes."

Scott said, "Look at your panel, Captain. The pull from the thing is increasing. The drain on our shields is getting critical."

"How much time, Scotty?"

"Not more than an hour now, sir."

"Shield power is an unconditional priority. Put all secondary systems on standby."

"Aye, sir."

"Bones, can we kill that thing without killing Spock? And ourselves, too?"

"I don't know. It's a living cell. If we had an antibiotic that—"

"How many billions of kiloliters would it take?"

"Okay, Jim. Okay."

Uhura, her face radiant, turned from her console. "I'm receiving a message from Mr Spock, sir. Low energy channel, faint but readable."

"Give it to me, Lieutenant."

"Faint" wasn't the word. Weak was. Very weak now. Spock said, "I… am losing life support… and minimal shield energy. The organism's nervous energy is… only maximal within protective membrane… interior… relatively insensitive… sufficient charge of… could destroy… tell Dr McCoy… he should have wished… me luck…"

The bridge people sensed the burden of the message. Silence fell, speech faltering at the realization that Spock was lost. Only the lowered hum of power-drained machinery made itself heard.

Kirk lay unmoving on the couch in his quarters. Spock was dead. And to what point? If he'd been able to transmit his information on how to destroy the thing, he would have died for a purpose. But even that small joy had been denied to him. Spock was dead for no purpose at all, to no end that mattered to him.

Without knocking, McCoy came in and sat down on the couch beside the motionless Kirk.

"What's on your mind, Dr McCoy?"

"Spock," McCoy said. "Call me sentimental. I've been called worse things. I believe he's still alive out there in that mess of protoplasm."

"He knew the odds when he went out. He knew so much. Now he's dead." Kirk lifted an arm into the air, contemplating the living hand at the end of it. "What is this thing? Not intelligent. At least, not yet."

"It is disease," McCoy said.

"This cell—this germ extending its filthy life for eleven thousand miles—one single cell of it. When it's grown to billions, we will be the germs. We shall be the disease invading its body."

"That's a morbid thought, Jim. Its whole horror lies in its size."

"Yes. And when our form of life was born, what micro-universe did we destroy? How does a body destroy an infection, Bones?"

"By forming anti-bodies."

"Then that's what we've got to be—an anti-body." He looked at McCoy. Then, repeating the word "antibody," he jumped to his feet and struck the intercom button. "Scotty, suppose you diverted all remaining power to the shields? Suppose you gave it all to them—and just kept impulse power in reserve?"

"Cut off the engine thrust?" Scott cried. "Why, we'd be sucked into that thing as helplessly as if it were a wind tunnel!"

"Exactly, Mr Scott. Prepare to divert power on my signal. Kirk out."

He turned to find himself facing McCoy's diagnostic Feinberger. "Got something to say, Bones?"

"Technically, no. Medically, yes. Between the strain and the stimulants, your edges are worn smooth. You're to keep off your feet for a while."

"I don't have a while. None of us do. Let's go…"

He took time to compose his face before he stepped out of the bridge elevator. He took his place in his command chair before he spoke into the intercom. "All hands, this is the Captain speaking. We are going to enter the body of this organism. Damage-control parties stand by—all decks secure for collision. Kirk out"

"It's now or never," he thought—and called Engineering.

"Ready, Mr Scott?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now," Kirk said.

The ship took a violent forward plunge. Kirk, gripping his chair, glanced at the screen. The blackness grew denser as they sped toward it. "Impact—twenty-five seconds, sir," Sulu said intensely.

Then shock knocked Sulu from his chair. Something flared from the screen. Chekov, sprawled on the deck, looked up at his console as the ship steadied. "We're through, sir!" he shouted.

Uhura, recovering her position, called, "Damage parties report minimal hurt, Captain."

Kirk didn't acknowledge the information. The blackness on the screen had gone opaque. The *Enterprise,* lost in the vast interior of the organism, moved sluggishly through the lightlessness of gray jelly.

Engineering again. "Mr Scott, we still have our impulse power?"

"I saved all I could, sir. I don't know if there's enough to get us out of this again. Or time enough to do it in."

"We have committed ourselves, Mr Scott."

"Aye. But what are we committed to? We've got no power for the phasers."

McCoy made an impatient gesture. "We couldn't use them if we did. Their heat would rebound from this muck and roast us alive."

"The organism would love the phasers. It eats power—" Kirk broke off. A frantic Scott, rushing from the elevator, had caught his last word. "Power!" he cried. "That's the problem, Captain! If we can't use power to destroy this beast, what is it we *can* use?"

"Anti-power," Kirk said.

"What?" McCoy said.

Scott was staring at him. "This thing has a negative energy charge. Everything that has worked has worked in reverse. In its body, we're an anti-body, Scotty. So we'll use anti-power—anti-matter—to kill it."

Scott's tension relaxed like a pricked balloon. "Aye, sir! That it couldn't swallow! What good God gave you that idea, Captain?"

"Mr Spock," Kirk said. "It's what he was trying to tell us before… we lost him. Mr Chekov, prepare a probe. Scotty, well need a magnetic bottle for the charge. How soon?"

"It's on its way, laddie!"

"Mr Chekov, timing detonator on the probe. We'll work out the setting. Mr Sulu, what's our estimated arrival at the nucleus?"

"Seven minutes, sir."

"Jim, how close are you going to it?"

"Point-blank range. Implant it—and back away."

"But the probe has a range of—"

Kirk interrupted McCoy. "The eddies and currents in the protoplasm could drift the probe thousands of kilometers away from the nucleus. No, we must be directly on target. We won't get a second chance."

Kirk rubbed the stiffening muscles at the nape of his neck. "Time for another stimulant, Bones."

"You'll blow up. How long do you think you can go on taking that stuff?"

"Just hold me together for another seven minutes."

He took one of the minutes to address his Captain's log. "Should we fail in this mission, I wish to record here that the following personnel receive special citations: Lieutenant Commander Leonard McCoy, Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott,—and

my highest recommendation to Commander Spock, Science Officer, who has given his life in performance of his duty."

As he punched off the recorder, Scott, hurrying back to the command chair, paused to listen to Sulu say, "Target coordinates programmed, sir. Probe ready to launch."

"Mr Sulu, program the fuse for a slight delay." He swung to Chekov. "All non-essential systems on standby. Communications, prepare for scanning. Conserve every bit of power. We've got to make it out of this membrane before the explosion. Make it work, Scotty. Pray it works."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr Chekov, launch probe at zero acceleration. Forward thrust, one tenth second."

"Probe launched," Chekov said.

The moment finally passed. Then the ship bucked to the sound of straining metal. In the dimness made by the fading lights of the bridge, the air became sultry, suddenly heavy, oppressive. Kirk could feel the racing of his body's pulses. Then the air was breathable again; Chekov, turning, said, "Confirmed, sir. The probe is lodged in the nucleus… close to the chromosome bodies."

Kirk nodded. "Mr Sulu, back out of here the way we came in. Let's not waste time. That was a nice straight line, Mr Chekov."

Chekov flushed with pleasure. "Estimate we'll be out in six point thirty-nine minutes, sir." He glanced back at his panel, frowning. "Captain! Metallic substance outside the ship!"

"Spock?" McCoy said.

Chekov flicked on the screen. "Yes, sir. It's the shuttlecraft, lying there dead on its side."

In one bound Kirk was beside Uhura. "Lieutenant, give me Mr Spock's voice channel! High gain!"

The microphone shook in his hand as he waited for her to test the wave length. "Ready, sir," she said.

He waited again to try and steady his voice. "Mr Spock, do you read me? Spock, *come in!*" He whirled to Scott. "Mr Scott, tractor beam!"

"Captain… we don't have the time to do it! We've got only a fifty-three percent escape margin!"

"Will you kindly take an order, Lieutenant Commander? Two tractor beams on that craft!"

Scott reddened. "Tractor beams on, sir."

"Glad to hear it!" Kirk said—and incredibly the mike in his hand was speaking. "I… recommend you… abandon this attempt, Captain. Do… not risk the ship further… on my account."

Wordless, Kirk handed the mike to McCoy. McCoy looked at him and he nodded. "Shut up, Spock!" McCoy yelled. You're being rescued!" He returned the mike to Kirk.

Spock said, "Thank you, Captain McCoy."

Weak as he was, Kirk thought, he'd find the strength to cock one sardonic eyebrow.

Weak—but alive. A knowledge better than McCoy's stimulants. "Time till explosion, Mr Chekov?"

"Fifty-seven seconds, sir."

"You're maintaining tractor beam on the shuttle-craft, Mr Scott?"

"Aye, sir." But the Scottish gloom of Kirk's favorite engineer was still unsubdued. "However, I can't guarantee it will hold when that warhead explodes." He glanced at his board. Despite the dourness of his expectations, he gave a startled jump. "The power levels show dead, sir."

Then the power levels and everything else ceased to matter. The ship whirled. A white-hot glare flashed through the bridge. McCoy was smashed to the deck. In the glare Kirk saw Chekov snatched from his chair to fall unconscious at the elevator door. Uhura's body, on the floor beside her console, rolled to the ship's rolling. Disinterestedly, Kirk realized that blood was pouring from a gash in his forehead. A handkerchief appeared in his hand—and Sulu crawled away from him back in the direction of his chair. He sat up and tied the handkerchief around his head. It's what you did in a tough tennis game to keep the sweat out of your eyes… a long time since he played tennis…

"Mr Sulu," he said, "can you activate the view-screen?"

Stars. They had come back. The stars had come back.

A good crew. Chekov had limped back to his station. Not that he needed to say it. But it was good to hear, anyway. "The organism is destroyed, Captain. The explosion must have ruptured the membrane. It's thrown us clear."

The stars were back. So was the power.

Kirk laid his hand on Scott's shoulder. "And the shuttlecraft, Scotty?"

Spock's voice spoke from the bridge speaker. "Shuttlecraft to *Enterprise.* Request permission to come aboard."

Somebody put the mike in his hand. “You survived that volcano, Mr Spock?”

“Obviously, Captain. And I have some very interesting data on the organism that I was unable to…”

McCoy, rubbing his bruised side, shouted, “Don’t be so smart, Spock! You botched that acetylcholine test, don’t forget!”

“Old Home Week,” Kirk said. “Bring the shuttlecraft aboard, Mr Scott. Mr Chekov, lay in a course for Starbase Six. Warp factor five.”

He untied the bloody handkerchief. “Thanks, Mr Sulu. I’ll personally see it to the laundry. Now I’m off to the hangar deck. Then Mr Spock and I will be breaking out our mountaineering gear.”

A PIECE OF THE ACTION

(David P. Harmon and Gene L. Coon)

It was difficult to explain to Bela Okmyx, who called himself "Boss" of Dana Iotia Two, that though the message from the lost *Horizon* had been sent a hundred years ago, the *Enterprise* had only received it last month. For that matter, he did not seem to know what the "galaxy" meant, either.

Kirk did not know what he expected to find, but he was braced for anything. Subspace radio was not the only thing the *Horizon* had lacked. She had landed before the non-interference directive had come into effect, and while the Iotians were just at the beginnings of industrialization. And the Iotians had been reported to be extremely intelligent—and somewhat imitative. The *Horizon* might have changed their culture drastically before her departure and shipwreck.

Still, the man called Boss seemed friendly enough. He didn't understand what "transported" meant either, in the technical sense, but readily suggested a rendezvous at an intersection marked by a big building with white columns in a public square where, he said, he would provide a reception committee. All quite standard, so far.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy beamed down, leaving Scott at the con. They materialized into a scene which might at first have been taken for an area in any of the older cities of present-day Earth, but with two significant exceptions; no children were visible, and all the adults, male and female alike, were wearing sidearms. Their dress was reminiscent of the United States of the early twentieth century.

This had barely registered when a sharp male voice behind them said, "Okay, you three. Let's see you petrify."

The officers turned to find themselves confronted by two men carrying clumsy two-handed weapons which Kirk recognized as a variant of the old submachine gun.

"Would you mind clarifying your statement, please?" Spock said.

"I want to see you turn to stone. Put your hands up over your head—or you ain't gonna have no head to put your hands over."

The two were standing close enough together so that Kirk could have stunned them both from the hip, but he disliked stopping situations before they had even begun to develop. He obeyed, his officers following suit.

The man who had spoken kept them covered while the other silently relieved them of their phasers and communicators. He seemed momentarily in doubt about McCoy's tricorder, but he took that, too. A few pedestrians stopped to watch; they seemed only mildly curious, and some of them even seemed to approve. Were these men policemen, then? They were dressed no differently from anyone else; perhaps more expensively and with more color, but that was all.

The silent man displayed his harvest to his spokesman. The latter took a phaser and examined it. "What's this?"

"Be very careful with that, please," Kirk said. "It's a weapon."

"A heater, huh? The Boss'll love that."

"A Mr Bela Okmyx invited us down. He said…"

"I know what he said. What he don't tell Kalo ain't worth knowing. He said some boys would meet you. Okay, we're meeting you."

"Those guns aren't necessary," McCoy said.

"You trying to make trouble, bud? Don't give me those baby blue eyes."

"What?"

"I don't buy that innocent routine." Kalo looked at Spock's ears. "You a boxer?"

"No," Spock said. "Why does everybody carry fire-arms? Are you people at war?"

"I never heard such stupid questions in my life." Kalo jerked his gun muzzle down the street. "Get moving."

As they began to walk, Kirk became aware of a distant but growing thrumming sound. Suddenly a squeal was added to it and it became much larger.

"Get down!" Kalo shouted, throwing himself to the street. The people around him were already dropping, or seeking shelter. Kirk dived for the dirt.

A vehicle that looked like two mismatched black bricks on four wheels bore down on them. Two men leaned out of it with submachine guns, which suddenly produced a terrible, hammering

roar. Kalo got off a burst at it, but bis angle was bad for accuracy. Luckily, it was not good for the gunners in the car, either.

Then the machine was gone, and the pedestrians picked themselves up. McCoy looked about, then knelt by the silent member of the "reception committee," but he was plainly too late.

Kalo shook his head. "Krako's getting more gall all the time."

"Is this the way you greet all your visitors?" Kirk demanded.

"It happens, pal."

"But this man is dead," McCoy said.

"Yeah? Well, we ain't playing for peanuts. Hey, you dopes, get outta here!" He shouted suddenly to what looked like the beginning of a crowd. "Ain't you never seen a hit before? Get lost!"

He resumed herding his charges, leaving the dead man unconcernedly behind. Kirk kept his face impassive, but his mind was busy. A man had been shot down, and no one had blinked an eye; it seemed as though it were an everyday happening. Was this the cultural contamination they had been looking for? But the crew of the *Horizon* hadn't been made up of cold-blooded killers, nor had they reported the Iotian culture in that state.

A young girl, rather pretty, emerged from a store entrance and cut directly across to them, followed by another. "You, Kalo," she said.

"Get lost."

"When's the Boss going to do something about the crummy street lights around here? A girl ain't safe."

"And how about the laundry pickup?" said the second girl. "We ain't had a truck by in three weeks."

"Write him a letter," Kalo said indifferently.

"I did. He sent it back with postage due."

"Listen, we pay our percentages. We're entitled to some service for our money."

"Get *lost,* I said." Kalo shook his head as the girls sullenly fell behind. "Some people got nothing to do but complain."

Kirk stared at him. He was certainly an odd sight—odder than before, now that his pockets were stuffed with all the hand equipment from the *Enterprise* trio, and he had a submachine gun under each arm. But he looked none the less dangerous for that. "Mr Kalo, is this the way your citizens get things done? Their right of petition?"

"If they pay their percentages, the Boss takes care of them. We go in here."

"In here" was a building bearing a brightly polished brass plaque. It read:

BELA OKMYX
BOSS
NORTHSIDE TERRITORY

The end of the line was an office, large and luxurious, complete with heavy desk, a secretary of sorts and framed pictures—except that one of the frames, Kirk saw, surrounded some kind of pistol instead. A heavy-set, swarthy man sat behind the desk.

"Got 'em, Boss," Kalo said. "No sweat."

The big man smiled and rose. "Well, Captain Kirk. Come in. Sit down. Have a drink. Good stuff—distill it myself."

"No, thank you. You are Mr Okmyx? This is Mr Spock, my First Officer. And Dr McCoy."

"A real pleasure. Sit down. Put down the heater, Kalo. These guys is guests." He turned back to Kirk. "You gotta excuse my boys. You just gotta be careful these days."

"Judging from what we've seen so far, I agree." Kirk said. "They call you the Boss. Boss of what?"

"My territory. Biggest in the world. Trouble with being the biggest is that punks is alia time trying to cut in."

"There is something astonishingly familiar about all this, Captain," Spock said.

"How many other territories are there?"

"Maybe a dozen, not counting the small fry—and they get bumped anyway when I get around to it."

"Do they include, if I may ask," Spock said, "a gentleman named Krako?"

"You know about Krako?"

"He hit us, Boss," Kalo said. "Burned Mirt."

Bela scowled. "I want him hit back."

"I'll take care of it."

Kirk had noticed a huge book on a stand nearby. He rose and moved toward it. Kalo raised his gun muzzle again, but at a quick signal from Bela, dropped it. The book was bound like a Bible, in white leather, with gold lettering reading: *Chicago Mobs of the Twenties.* The imprint was New York, 1993.

"How'd you get this, Mr Okmyx?" he asked.

"That's The Book. *The* Book. They left it—the men from the *Horizon*".

"And there is your contamination, Captain," Spock said. "An entire gangster culture. An imitative people, one book, and…"

"No cracks about The Book," Bela said harshly. "Look, I didn't bring you here for you to ask questions. You gotta do something for me. Then I tell you anything you want to know."

"Anything we can do," Kirk said, putting the book down, "we will. We have laws of our own we must observe."

"Okay," Bela said. He leaned forward earnestly. "Look, I'm a peaceful man, see? I'm sick and tired of all the hits. Krako hits me, I hit Krako, Tepo hits me, Krako hits Tepo. We ain't getting noplace. There's too many bosses, know what I mean? Now if there was just one, maybe we could get some things done. That's where you come in."

"I don't quite understand," Kirk said.

"You Feds made a lot of improvements since the other ship came here. You probably got all kinds of fancy heaters. So here's the deal. You gimme all the heaters I need—enough tools so I can hit all the punks once and for all—and I take over the whole place. Then all you have to deal with is me."

"Let me get this straight," Kirk said. "You want us to supply you with arms and assistance so you can carry out aggression against other nations?"

"What nations? I got some hits to make. You help me make them."

"Fascinating," Spock said. "But quite impossible."

"I'd call it outrageous," McCoy said.

"Even if we wanted to," Kirk said, "our orders are very…"

Bela gestured to Kalo, who raised his gun again. Though Kirk did not see any signal given, the door opened and another armed man came in.

"I ain't interested in *your* orders," Bela said. "You got eight hours to gimme what I asked for. If I don't get the tools by then, I'm gonna have your ship pick you up again—in a large number of very small boxes. Know what I mean, pal?"

Kalo belatedly began to unload the captured devices onto the Boss's desk. He pointed to a phaser. "This here's a heater, Boss. I don't know what the other junk is."

"A heater, eh? Let's see how it works." He pointed it at a wall. Kirk jerked forward.

"Don't do that! You'll take out half the wall!"

"That good, eh? Great. Just gimme maybe a hundred of these and we don't have no more trouble."

"Out of the question," Kirk said.

"I get what I want." Bela picked up a communicator, "What are these here?"

Kirk remained silent. Jerking a thumb toward McCoy, Bela said to Kalo, "Burn him."

"All right," Kirk said hastily. "It's a communications device, locked onto my ship."

Bela fiddled with one until it snapped open in his hand. "Hey," he said to it. "In the ship."

"Scott here. Who is this?"

"This here's Bela Okmyx. I got your Captain and his friends down here. You want 'em back alive, send me a hundred of them fancy heaters of yours, and some troops to show us how to use them. You got eight hours. Then I put the hit on your friends. Know what I mean?"

"No," Scott's voice said. "But I'll find out."

Bela closed the communicator. "Okay. Kalo, take 'em over to the warehouse. Put 'em in the bag, and keep an eye on 'em, good. You hear?"

"Sure, Boss. Move out, you guys."

The warehouse room had a barred window and was sparsely furnished, but it was equipped with another copy of The Book. Kalo and two henchmen were playing cards at a table, guns handy, their eyes occasionally flicking to Kirk, Spock and McCoy at the other end of the room.

"One book," McCoy said. "And they made it the blueprint for their entire society. Amazing."

"But not unprecedented," Spock said. "At one time, in old Chicago, conventional government nearly broke down. The gangs almost took over."

"This Okmyx must be the worst of the lot."

"Through we may quarrel with his methods, his goal is essentially the correct one," Spock said. "This culture must become united—or it will degenerate into complete anarchy. It is already

on the way; you will recall the young women who complained of failing services."

"If this society broke down, because of the influence of the *Horizon,* the Federation is responsible," Kirk said. "We've got to try to straighten the mess out. Spock, if you could get to the sociological banks of the computer, could you come up with a solution?"

"Quite possibly, Captain."

Signaling Spock and McCoy to follow him unobtrusively, Kirk gradually drifted toward the card game. The players looked up at him warily, free hands on guns; but they relaxed again as he pulled over a chair and sat down. The game was a variety of stud poker.

After a few moments, Kirk said, "That's a kid's game."

"Think so?" Kalo said.

"I wouldn't waste my time."

"Who's asking you to?"

"On Beta Antares Four, they play a game for men. Of course, it's probably too involved for you. It takes intelligence."

Antares is not a double star; Kirk had taken the chance in order to warn the sometimes rather literal-minded that he was lying deliberately.

"Okay, I'll bite," Kalo said. "Take the cards, big man. Show us how it's played."

"The Antares cards are different, of course, but not too different," Kirk said, riffling through them. "The game's called Fizzbin. Each player gets six cards—except for the man on the dealer's right, who gets seven. The second card goes up—except on Tuesdays, of course… Ah, Kalo, that's good, you've got a nine. That's half a fizzbin already."

"I need another nine?"

Spock and McCoy drew nearer with quite natural curiosity, since neither of them had ever heard of the game. Neither had Kirk.

"Oh, no. That would be a sralk and you'd be disqualified. You need a King or a deuce, except at night, when a Queen or a four would… Two sixes! That's excellent—unless, of course, you get another six. Then you'd have to turn it in, unless it was black."

"But if it was black?" Kalo said, hopelessly confused.

"Obviously, the opposite would hold," Kirk said, deciding to throw in a touch of something systematic for further confusion. "Instead of turning your six in, you'd get another card. Now, what

you are really hoping for is a royal fizzbin, but the odds against that are, well, astronomical, wouldn't you say, Spock?"

"I have never computed them, Captain."

"Take my word they're considerable. Now the last card around. We call it the cronk, but its home name is *klee-et** Ready? Here goes."

*A Vulcan word meaning, roughly, "prepare to engage." See "Amok Time," *Star Trek Three.*

He dealt, making sure that Kalo's card went off the table. "Oops, sorry."

"I'll get it."

Kalo bent over. In the same instant, Kirk put his hands under the table and shoved. It went over on the other two. McCoy and Spock were ready; the action was hardly more than a flurry before the three guards were helpless. Kirk parceled out the guns.

"Spock, find the radio transmitting station. Uhura is monitoring their broadcasts. Cut in and have yourself and Bones beamed up to the ship."

"Surely you are coming, Captain?"

"Not without Bela Okmyx."

"Jim, you can't…"

"This mess is our responsibility, Bones. You have your orders. Let's go."

Kirk at first felt a little uneasy walking a city street with a submachine gun under his arm, but no one passing seemed to find it unusual. On the contrary, it seemed to be a status symbol; people cleared the way for him.

But the walk ended abruptly with two handguns stuck into his ribs from behind. He had walked into an ambush. How had Bela gotten word so fast?

The answer to that was soon forthcoming. The two hoods who had mousetrapped him crowded him into a car—and the ride was a long one. At its end was another office, almost a duplicate of Bela's; but the man behind the desk was short, squat, bull-shaped and strange. He arose with a jovial smile.

"So you're the Fed. Well, well. I'm Krako—Jojo Krako, Boss of the South Territory. Hey, I'm glad to see you."

"Would you mind telling me how you knew about me?"

"I got all Bela's communications bugged. He can't make a date with a broad without I know about it. Now you're probably wondering why I brought you here."

"Don't tell me. You want to make a deal."

Krako was pleased. "I like that. Sharp. Sharp, huh, boys?"

"Sharp, Boss."

"Let me guess some more," Kirk said. "You want—uh—heaters, right? And troops to teach you how to use them. And you'll hit the other bosses and take over the whole planet. And then we'll sit down and talk, right?"

"Wrong," Krako said. "More than talk. I know Bela. He didn't offer you beans. Me, I'm a reasonable man. Gimme what I want, and I cut you in for, say, a third. Skimmed right off the top. How do you like that?"

"I've got a better idea. You know this planet has to be united. So let's sit down, you, me, and Bela, get in contact with the other bosses, and discuss the matter like rational men."

Krako seemed to be genuinely outraged. "That ain't by The Book, Kirk. We know how to handle things! You make hits! Somebody argues, you lean on him! You think we're stupid or something?"

"No, Mr Krako," Kirk said, sighing. "You're not stupid. But you are peculiarly unreasonable."

"Pally, I got ways of getting what I want. You want to live, Kirk? Sure you do. But after I get done with you, you're liable to be sorry—unless you come across. Zabo, tell Cirl the Knife to sharpen up his blade. I might have a job for him." The smile came back. "Of course, you gimme the heaters and you keep your ears."

"No deal."

"Too bad. Put him on ice."

The two hoods led Kirk out.

On shipboard, Spock's fortunes were not running much better. There turned out to be no specifics in the computer, not even a record of a planet-wide culture based on a moral inversion. Without more facts, reason and logic were alike helpless.

"Mr Spock," Uhura said. "Mr Okmyx from the surface is making contact. Audio only."

Spock moved quickly to the board. "Mr Okmyx, this is Spock."

"How'd you get up there?" Bela's voice asked.

"Irrelevant, since we are here."

"Uh—yeah. But you'd better get back down. Krako's put the bag on your Captain."

Spock raised his eyebrows. "Why would he put a bag on the Captain?"

"Kidnapped him, dope. He'll scrag him, too."

"If I understand you correctly, that would seem to be a problem. Have you any suggestions?"

"Sure. You guys got something I want. I can help you get the Captain back. No reason we can't make a deal."

"I am afraid I find it difficult to trust you, sir."

"What's to trust? Business is business. We call a truce. You come down. My boys spring Kirk. Then we talk about you giving me a hand."

"Since we must have our Captain back," Spock said after a moment, "I accept. We shall arrive in your office within ten minutes. Spock out."

McCoy had been standing nearby, listening. "You're going to trust him?"

"If we are to save the Captain, without blatant and forceful interference on the planet, then we must have assistance from someone indigenous. At the moment, we are forced to trust Mr Okmyx." He turned toward Scott. "Mr Scott, although I hope to avoid their use, I think you should adjust one of the phaser banks to a strong stun position."

"Now," McCoy said, "you're starting to make sense."

Spock did not reply, since nothing in the situation made sense to him. Trusting Okmyx was nothing short of stupid, and the use of force was forbidden by General Order Number One. In such a case, the only course was to abide by the Captain's principle of letting the situation ripen.

Bela, of course, had a trap arranged. Spock had expected it, but there had been no way to avoid it. What he had not expected—nor had Bela—was the abrupt subsequent appearance of Kirk in the doorway, with a submachine gun under his arm.

"How did you get away?" Spock asked interestedly, after the gangsters had been disarmed—a long process which produced a sizable heap of lethal gadgets, some of them wholly unfamiliar.

"Krako made the mistake of leaving me a radio; that was all I needed for the old trip-wire trick. I thought I told you to get to the

ship."

"We have been there, Captain. The situation required our return."

"It may be just as well. Find out anything from the computers?"

"Nothing useful, Captain. Logic and factual knowledge do not seem to apply here."

"You admit that?" McCoy said.

"With the greatest reluctance, Doctor."

"Then you won't mind if I play a hunch?" Kirk said.

"I am not sanguine about hunches, sir, but I have no practical alternative."

"What are you going to do, Jim?"

"Now that I've got Bela," Kirk said, "I'm going to put the bag on Krako."

"On Krako?" Bela said. "You ain't serious?"

"Why not?" Kirk turned to Bela and fingered his suit lapel. "That's nice material."

"It ought to be. It cost a bundle."

"Get out of it. You, too."

"Hey, now, wait a minute…"

"Take it off—pally! This time nobody's going to bag me."

Seeing that he meant it, Kalo and Bela got out of their clothes; Kirk and Spock donned them. Scooping up the required submachine guns as passports, they went out, leaving McCoy in charge.

In front of the office sat the large black car that Bela used. Fishing in the pockets of his borrowed suit, Kirk found the keys. They got in.

"Any idea how to run this thing, Spock?"

"No, Captain. But it should not be too difficult."

"Let's see," Kirk said, studying the controls. "A keyhole. For the—ignition process, I think. Insert and turn. Right."

He felt around with his foot and touched a button. The car stuttered and the engine was running.

"Interesting," Spock said.

"As long as it runs. Now, let's see. I think—gears…"

He pulled the lever down, which produced nothing but an alarming grinding sound which he could feel in his hand as well as hear.

"As I recall," Spock said, "there was a device called the clutch. Perhaps one of those foot pedals…"

The right-hand pedal didn't seem to work, but the left-hand one allowed the gear lever to go down. Kirk let the pedal up cautiously, and the car started with a lurch.

Kirk remembered the way to Krako's offices well enough, but the trip was a wild one; there seemed to be some trick to working the clutch which Kirk hadn't mastered. Luckily, pedestrians gave the big black vehicle a wide berth. Spock just hung on. When it was over, he observed, "Captain, you are a splendid starship commander, but as a taxi driver you leave much to be desired."

"Haven't had time to practice. Leave these clumsy guns under the seat; we'll use phasers."

They made their way to Krako, leaving a trail of stunned guards behind. The Boss did not seem a bit taken aback when they burst in on him; he had four hoods behind him, guns aimed at the door.

"You don't shoot, we don't shoot," he said rapidly.

"This would appear to be an impasse," Spock said.

"Who's your friend with the ears?" Krako asked. "Never mind. Ain't this nice? I was wondering how I was going to get you back, and you delivered yourself! You don't think you'll get out of it this time, do you?"

"We didn't come here for games," Kirk said. "This is bigger than you or Okmyx or any of the others."

The phaser which Krako had previously taken from Kirk was on the desk, still on safety lock. Krako nudged it. "Don't talk fancy. All you gotta do is tell me how to work these things."

"Krako," Kirk said, "can you trust all your men?"

"Yeah, sure. I either trust 'em or they're dead."

"Maybe. But when it comes to weapons like these—well, one of them could make a man a pretty big boss around here."

Krako thought about it. At last he said, "Zabo and Karf, stay put. You other guys vanish… All right, these two is okay. Now that we got no busy little eyes around, how do you work this thing?"

Kirk moved in on Krako hard and fast, spitting his words out like bullets. "Knock it off, Krako. We don't have time to show you how to play with toys."

"Toys?"

"What do you think we're here for, Krako? To get a cut of your deal? Forget it. That's peanuts to an outfit like the Federation."

"It is?" Krako said, a little dazed by the sudden switch.

"Unquestionably," Spock said.

"We came here to take over, Krako. The whole ball of wax. Maybe, if you cooperate, we'll cut *you* in for a piece of the action."

"A minute piece," Spock added.

"How much is that?" Krako asked.

"We'll figure it out later."

"But—I thought you guys "had some kind of law about no interference…"

"Who'd interfering? We're just taking over."

Spock seemed slightly alarmed. "Uh—Captain…"

"Cool it, Spocko. Later."

"What's your deal?" Krako asked.

Kirk motioned him to his feet and, when the bewildered gangster stood, Kirk sat down in his chair and swung his feet up onto the desk. He appropriated one of Krako's cigars.

"The Federation wants this planet, but we don't want to have to come in and use our muscle. That ain't subtle. So what we do is help one guy take over. He pulls the planet's strings—and we pull his. Follow?"

"But what's your cut?"

Kirk eyed the unlit cigar judiciously. "What do you care, so long as you're in charge? Right, Spocko?"

"Right on the button, Boss," Spock said, falling into his role a little belatedly but with a certain relish. "Of course, there's always Bela Okmyx…"

Krako thought only a moment. "You got a deal. Call your ship and bring down your boys and whatever you need."

Kirk got to his feet and snapped open his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.*"

"*Enterprise.* Scott here, sir."

"Scotty, we made the deal with Krako."

"Uh—we did, sir?"

"We're ready to make the hit. We're taking over the whole planet as soon as you can get ready."

"Is that wise, sir?"

"Sure, we can trust Krako—he doesn't have any choice. He's standing here right now, *about three feet to my left,* all ready to be our pal. I'd like to show him the ship, just so he's sure I'm giving him the straight dope. But you know how it is."

"Oh aye, sir," Scott said. "I know indeed."

"We'll be needing enough phasers to equip all of Krako's men, plus advisers—troops to back them up on the hit. You moving, Scotty?"

"Aye, Uhura's on to the Transporter Room and two of the boys are on their way. Ready when you say the word."

"Very well, Scotty, begin."

Krako looked curiously at Kirk. "You mean you're gonna start bringing all those guys down now?"

"No—not exactly." As he spoke, the hum of the Transporter effect filled the room, and Krako shimmered out of existence. Zabo and Karf stared, stunned—and a second later were stunned more thoroughly.

"Well played—Spocko."

Spock winced. "So we have—put the bag on Krako. What is our next maneuver, Captain?"

"Back to Bela's place."

"In the car, Captain?"

"It's faster than walking. Don't tell me you're afraid of cars, Spock."

"Not at all. It is your driving which alarms me."

Through the door of Bela's office, they heard McCoy saying worriedly, "Where *are* they?"

And then Bela's, "Knowing Krako, well be lucky if he sends 'em back on a blotter."

Kirk walked in. "Wrong again, Okmyx." He brushed past the relieved McCoy. "Outta my way, Sawbones. I want to talk to this guy. I'm getting tired of playing patty-cake with you penny ante operators."

"Who you calling penny ante?" Bela said, bristling.

"Nobody but you, baby. Now listen. The Federation's moving in here. We're taking over, and if you play ball, we'll leave a piece of the pie for you. If you don't, you're out. All the way out. Got that?" He shoved the phaser under Bela's nose to make the point.

"Yeah—yeah, sure, Kirk. Why didn't you say so in the first place? I mean—all you hadda do was explain."

The communicator came out. "Scotty, you got Krako on ice up there?"

"Aye, Captain."

"Keep him till I ask for him. We're going to be making some old-style phone calls from these coordinates. Lock on at the receiving end and transport the party here to us. Okay, Okmyx. Start calling the other bosses."

Shrugging, Bela went to the phone and dialed four times. "Hello, Tepo? Guess who?… Yeah, I got a lot of nerve. What're you going to do about it?"

With a hum, Tepo materialized, holding a non-existent phone in his hand. McCoy moved in to disarm him.

"? coming over there with a couple of my boys; and… Mother!"

Bela grinned at Kirk. "Hey, this ain't bad."

"Keep dialing."

Half an hour later, the office was crowded with dazed gang leaders, Krako among them. Kirk climbed up on the desk, now cradling a local gun to add weight to his argument.

"All right, pipe down, everybody. I'll tell you what you're going to do. The Federation just took over around here, whether you like it or not. You guys have been running this planet like a piecework factory. From here on, it's all under one roof. You're going to form a syndicate and run this planet like a business. That means you make a profit."

"Yeah?" Tepo called. "And what's your percentage?"

"I'm cutting the Federation in for forty per cent." He leveled the gun. "You got objections?"

Tepo had obviously had guns pointed at him too many times to be cowed. "Yeah. I hear a lot of talk, but all I see here is you and a couple of your boys. I don't see no Federation."

"Listen, they got a ship," Krako said. "I know—I been there."

"Yeah, but Tepo's got a point," Bela said. "All we ever see is them."

"I only saw three other guys and a broad while I was in the ship," Krako said. "Maybe there ain't any more?"

"There are four hundred…"

Kirk was interrupted by an explosion outside, followed by a fusillade of shots. Krako, who was nearest the window, peered around the edge of it.

"It's my boys," he reported. "Must think I'm still in the ship. They're making a hit on this place."

"My boys'll put 'em down," Bela said.

"Wanna bet?"

Kirk's communicator was already out. "Scotty, put ship's phasers on stun and fire a burst in a one-block radius around these coordinates, excluding this building."

"Right away, sir."

Kirk looked at the confused gangsters. "Gentlemen, you are about to see the Federation at work."

The noise roared on a moment more, and then the window was lit up with the phaser effect. Dead silence fell promptly.

Krako smiled weakly and swallowed. "Some trick."

"They're not dead, just knocked out for a while," Kirk said. "We could just as easily have killed them."

"Okay," Bela said. "We get the message. You were saying something about a syndicate."

"No, he was saying something about a percentage," Tepo said. "You sure forty percent is enough?"

"I think it will be just fine. We'll send someone around to collect it every year—and give you advice if you need it."

"That's reasonable," Bela said. He glared at the others. "Ain't that reasonable?"

There was a murmur of assent. Kirk smiled cheerfully. "Well, in that case, pull out some of that drinking stuff of yours, Okmyx, and let's get down to the talking."

The bridge of the *Enterprise* was routinely busy. Kirk was in the command chair, feeling considerably better to be back in uniform.

"I must say," Spock said, "your solution to the problem on Iotia is unconventional, Captain. But it does seem to be the only workable one."

"What troubles you is that it isn't logical to leave a criminal organization in charge. Is that it?"

"I do have some reservations. And how do you propose to explain to Starfleet Command that a starship will be sent around each year to collect 'our cut,' as you put it?"

" 'Our cut' will be put back into the planet's treasury—and the advisers and collectors can help steer the Iotians back into a more conventional moral and ethical system. In the meantime, the syndicate forms a central government that can effectively administer to the needs of the people. That's a step in the right

direction. Our group of 'governors' is already learning to take on conventional responsibilities. Guiding them is—our piece of the action."

Spock pondered. "Yes, it seems to make sense. Tell me, Captain. Whatever gave you so outlandish an idea—and where did you pick up all that jargon so quickly?"

Kirk grinned. "Courtesy of Krako. A radio wasn't all he left in my cell. He also left me some reading matter."

"Ah, of course. The Book."

"Spocko, now you're talkin'."

BY ANY OTHER NAME

(D. C. Fontana and Jerome Bixby)

The landing party answering the distress call consisted of Kirk, Spock, McCoy, the security officer Lt. Shea, and Yeoman Leslie Thompson. At first there seemed to be no source at all on the planet for the call—no wrecked spaceship, no debris. Had the ship been destroyed in space and the survivors proceeded here in a shuttle?

Then two people appeared from the nearby trees, a man and a woman, dressed in outfits rather like Merchant Marine jumpsuits. The woman was lovely, but it was the man who dominated their attention. He looked fortyish, with enormous power in his sturdy frame, great authority and competence in his bearing. Neither of the strangers seemed armed, but Kirk noticed that they wore small unobtrusive boxes on their belts. Their hands rested on the belts near the boxes in an attitude so casually assumed that it seemed to be only a part of their stance, but Kirk was wary.

"I'm Captain James Kirk of the USS *Enterprise.* We came in answer to your distress call."

"It was very kind of you to respond so quickly, Captain. But now you will surrender your ship to me."

Kirk stared. "You have an odd sense of humor."

The strangers touched buttons on the boxes. Instantly, Kirk found himself paralyzed—and so, evidently, was the rest of the "rescue" party.

"I am Rojan, of Kelva," the strange man said. "I am your Commander, from this moment on. Efforts to resist us, or to escape, will be severely punished. Soon we, and you, will leave this galaxy forever. You humans must face the end of your existence as you have known it."

The woman moved forward to relieve the people of the *Enterprise* of their phasers and communicators. Rojan went on: "You are paralyzed by a selective field that neutralizes impulses to the voluntary muscles. I will now release you all, Captain Kirk."

He touched the belt device. Kirk tensed to jump him, then thought better of it. “A neural field?”

“Radiated from a central projector, directed at whomever we wish.”

“What do you want?”

“Your ship, Captain. We have monitored many. The *Enterprise*—a starship—is the best of its kind in your galaxy. It will serve us well in the long voyage that is to come.”

“Voyage to where?”

“To your neighboring galaxy, in the constellation you call Andromeda.”

“*Why*”

“The Andromeda galaxy is our home,” Rojan said in a remote voice.

“What brought you here?” Spock said.

“Within ten millennia, high radiation levels will make life in our galaxy impossible; it is reaching the stage in its evolution which will make it what you call a quasar. The Kelvan Empire sent forth ships to explore other galaxies—to search for one which our race could conquer and colonize.”

“Sorry,” Kirk said. “This galaxy is occupied.”

“Captain, you think you are unconquerable—your ship impregnable. While we have talked, three of my people have boarded it, and the capture has begun.", He took one of the confiscated communicators from the Kelvan woman and clicked it open. “Subcommander Hanar, report.”

“This ship is ours,” a strange voice said from the communicator. “We control the bridge, engineering and life support.”

Rojan folded the communicator shut, and stowed it on his own belt.

“What good is capturing my ship?” Kirk said. “Even at maximum warp, the *Enterprise* couldn’t get to the Andromeda galaxy for thousands of years. It’s two million light-years away!”

“We will modify its engines to produce velocities far beyond the reach of your science. The journey between galaxies will take less than three hundred of your years.”

“Fascinating," Spock said, “Intergalactic travel requiring ‘only’ three hundred years is a leap beyond anything man has yet accomplished.”

Yeoman Thompson asked the Kelvan woman: “Did you make a voyage of three hundred years?”

"Our ships were of multigeneration design," the woman said. "I was born in the intergalactic void. I shall die there, during the return journey."

"Our mission," Rojan added, "will be completed by a Captain who will be my descendant."

"What happened to your ship?" Kirk said.

"There is an energy barrier at the rim of your galaxy—"

"I know. We've been there."

"We broke through it with great difficulty. Our ship was destroyed. We barely escaped in a life craft. Our time here has been spent scanning your systems, studying you. And now we have the means to begin our journey again."

"Why use our vessel?" Spock said. "Why not transmit a message back to your galaxy?"

"No form of transmission can penetrate the barrier."

"Rojan," Kirk said, "we could take your problem to our Federation. Research expeditions have catalogued hundreds of uninhabited planets in this galaxy. Surely some of them would be suitable for your colonization."

"We do not colonize, Captain," Rojan said sharply. "We conquer. We rule. There is no other way for us."

"In other words," McCoy said, 'this galaxy isn't big enough for both of us'?"

"What will happen to the intelligent races here?" Kirk said.

"They will not be mistreated. Merely subordinated." Rojan shrugged. "The fate of the inferior… in any galaxy. Ah, Hanar!"

While he had been speaking, another Kelvan had popped into being beside him, a younger man, with a hard intelligent face. There was no shimmer or any other such effect comparable to the workings of the Transporter; he just appeared.

"Tomar has examined the ship," Hanar said. "The modifications are under way."

"Space again!" said Rojan. "I don't think we could have kept our sanity, living so long on this accursed planet."

It did not seem to be so accursed to Kirk; in fact it was quite a pleasant, Earthlike place. But Hanar said: "It is an undisciplined environment; one cannot control it Yet there are things of interest."

"Yes. But—disturbing. These ugly shells in which we have encased ourselves… they have such heightened senses. How do humans manage to exist in such fragile casings?"

They did not seem to care at all whether they were overheard, an obvious expression of supreme confidence. Kirk listened intently to every word; he had known such self-confidence to be misplaced before.

"Since the ship is designed to sustain this form," Hanar said, "we have little choice."

Rojan turned to the woman. "Kelinda, take them to the holding area. We will be keeping you and your party here, Captain. Your crew will undoubtedly prefer to cooperate with us if they understand you are hostages."

"Move that way," said Kelinda. "Keep together."

Their jail proved to be a cave, with a door constructed of some odd-looking transparent material, which Spock and Kirk were examining. Shea was also at the door, looking out, ostensibly watching Kelinda.

"I'm unable to determine the nature of the material, Captain," Spock said. "But I do not believe even phaser fire could disturb its molecular structure."

"All right, we can't break out. Maybe we can find another way."

"Captain," said Yeoman Thompson, "what do they want from us? What land of people are they?"

"A good question, Yeoman."

They registered as human," McCoy said.

"No, more than that, Doctor," Spock said, frowning. "They registered as *perfect* human life forms. I recall noting that the readings were almost textbook responses. Most curious."

"Spock," Kirk said, "what are the odds on such a parallel in life forms in another galaxy?"

"Based on those we have encountered in our own galaxy, the probability of humanoid development is high. But I would say the chances were very much against such an absolute duplication."

Shea turned slightly from the door. "Well, however perfect they are, sir, there don't seem to be very many of them."

"But they've got the paralysis field," Kirk said. "Rojan mentioned a central projector."

"If we can put it out of operation," McCoy said, "we've got a chance!"

"I am constrained to point out," said Spock, "that we do not even know what this projector looks like."

"No," Kirk said, "but those devices on their belts might indicate the position of the source."

"I would like to have one to examine."

"You'll have one, sir," Shea said. "If I have to rip one of the Kelvans apart to get it for you."

"Lieutenant Shea," Kirk said firmly, "you'll have your chance—but I'll tell you when."

"Yes, sir."

Kirk eyed him narrowly; but he could understand the younger officer's defiant attitude toward their captors. "Spock, do you remember how you tricked that guard on Eminiar? The empathic mind touching-"

"Quite well, Captain. I made him think we had escaped."

"Can you do it again?"

"I will attempt it"

He checked Kelinda, who was standing fairly close to the bars, and then put his hands on the cave wall approximately behind her. Then he began to concentrate.

At first the Kelvan woman did not respond. Then she twitched a little, nervously, as though aware that something was wrong, but unable to imagine what. She glanced around, then straightened again.

Kirk signaled his people to position themselves along the wall, so that from outside the cave would appear to be empty. Then he bent and scooped some dirt from the loose, sandy floor.

Suddenly Spock broke out of his intense concentration, as though wrenched from it by something beyond him. He gasped and staggered back against the wall. At the same moment, Kelinda came to the door, opened it quickly and started in.

Kirk hurled his handful of dirt into her face. She cried out and clawed at her eyes. While she was half blinded, Kirk delivered a karate chop. It sent her sprawling, and, surprisingly, out. Kirk and McCoy dragged her the rest of the way inside.

"Mr Spock—?"

"I… will be… quite all right, Captain. We must hurry."

"Bones, keep an eye on him. Let's go." He took the belt device from Kelinda and led the way out. He had hardly taken two steps before he was paralyzed again, the device dropping from his limp hands.

"I am sorry, Captain," said Rojan's voice. He came into view with Hanar, who went into the cave. "The escape attempt was futile. You cannot stop us and you cannot escape us."

Hanar reappeared. "Kelinda is somewhat bruised, Rojan, but otherwise unhurt."

Rojan nodded, and turning back to Kirk, released the party from the freeze. "I cannot let this go unpunished. This will serve as an example." He pointed to Yeoman Thompson and security chief Shea. "Hanar, take these two aside."

"What are you going to do?" McCoy said.

"This is not your affair, Doctor. Captain, as a leader, you realize the importance of discipline. I need you and these other specialists. But those two are unnecessary to me."

"You can't just kill them!" Kirk said.

Rojan did not respond. Thompson turned, looking pleadingly at Kirk. "Captain…"

"Rojan, let them go. I'm responsible for them."

"I think we are somewhat alike, Captain. Each of us cares less for his own safety than for the lives of his command. We feel pain when others suffer for our mistakes. Your punishment shall be to watch your people die."

Rojan touched his belt device. Shea and the girl seemed to vanish instantly. Where each of them had been standing was an odd geometrically shaped block, about the size of a fist.

Hanar picked them up and brought them to Rojan, who held them up to Kirk. "This is the essence of what those people were… The flesh and brain, and also what you call the personality, distilled down to these compact shapes. Once crushed—" He closed his hand over one, crushing it in his grip, letting the fragments sift through his fingers, "—they are no more. This person is dead. However—" He flipped the second block away. It bounced to a halt on the grass. Rojan again touched a button, and Shea was standing there, bewildered, "—this person can be restored. As I said, Captain—very practical."

They were herded back into the cave, leaving behind the fragments which were all that were left of a pretty girl.

Shocked and dispirited, they all sat down on the cave floor but Shea. Spock's manner seemed more than usually distant.

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, quite all right, Captain."

McCoy said, "You looked very sick a while back, when you broke the mind lock."

"I did not break it," Spock said slowly. "I was… shoved away by… something I have never experienced before."

"What was it?" said Kirk.

"Images… bursting in my mind and consciousness. Colors… shapes… mathematical equations… fused and blurred. I have been attempting to isolate them. So far, I have been able to recall clearly only one. Immense beings… a hundred limbs that resemble tentacles, but are not… minds of such control and capacity that each limb could do a different job."

"You mean," McCoy said, "that's what the Kelvans really are?"

"I do not know. It seemed the central image, but whether it was a source or a memory, I cannot tell."

"If they do normally look like that," Kirk said, "why did they adapt to bodies like ours?"

"For the sake of deception, what else?" McCoy said.

Kirk remembered the conversation they had overheard. "No, practicality. They chose the *Enterprise* as the best kind of vessel for the trip, and they need us to run her. We have to stay in our gravity and atmosphere, and they had to adapt to it… We *have* to find a way to beat them. We outnumber them. Their only hold on us is the paralysis field."

"That's enough," said McCoy. "One wrong move and they jam all our neural circuits."

"Jamming," said Kirk. "That's it. Tricorders could analyze the frequency of the paralysis field. Spock, if you reverse the circuits on McCoy's neuroanalyzer, would it serve as a counterfield to jam the paralysis projector?"

"I am dubious about the possibility of success, Captain. The medical equipment is not built to put out any great amount of power. It would probably burn out."

"Is there any chance at all?"

"A small one."

"We'll take it. You and Bones have to get up to the ship"

"How?" said McCoy.

Kirk looked at his First Officer. "Spock, you're sick."

Spock's eyebrows went up. "Captain, I assure you that I am in excellent health."

"No, you're not. Dr McCoy has examined you, and you're seriously ill. In fact, if he doesn't get you up to Sickbay you may die. And Rojan won't let that happen because he needs you to get through the barrier."

"It's a good idea," McCoy said, "but anybody looking at him can tell he's healthy."

"Vulcans have the ability to put themselves into a land of trance… an enforced relaxation of every part of the mind and body. Right, Mr Spock?"

"We find it more useful for resting the body than the so-called vacation."

"Can you do it now, and come out of it when you're in Sickbay? Say in half an hour?"

"It will take me a moment to prepare."

Shea walked to where he could watch for guards, then turned to nod and wave an all clear. Spock, remaining seated, composed himself very carefully. He seemed to be directing his attention inward upon himself. Then, almost as if someone had snapped off his switch, he flopped limply to one side.

McCoy rose to examine him, and at once looked a little alarmed. "Jim, his heartbeat really is way down-respiration almost nonexistent—"

Kirk turned to the door quickly and shouted "Guard! Guard!"

Hanar appeared. "What do you want, human?"

"Mr Spock is ill. The doctor thinks he's dying."

"This illness came on him very suddenly," Hanar said. "Is it not unusual?"

"He's a Vulcan. They don't react like humans."

"Look, he may die," McCoy said as Hanar hesitated. "If I can get him up to Sickbay, there's a chance I can save him."

"Stand away from the door."

The others pulled away. Hanar came in, hand on his belt device, and bent to study the motionless Science Officer. He frowned. "I will have you beamed aboard, but you will be met by Tomar and watched."

As Hanar turned away, opening a communicator, Kirk and McCoy glanced toward each other.

"Do the best you can with him, Bones," Kirk said. McCoy nodded quickly, significantly.

The Kelvan Tomar and McCoy entered the *Enterprise's* examination room, supporting the limp Spock between them. Nurse Christine Chapel followed. "Doctor, what happened?"

McCoy ignored her. He said to Tomar, "Here. Put him down."

They eased Spock onto the table. Tomar peered curiously at the Vulcan, who was breathing only shallowly, and with alarmingly long pauses between breaths.

"Shall I summon more of your underlings?"

"I'll call my own underlings," McCoy said snappishly. "You stay out of the way. Miss Chapel, prepare two cc's of stokaline."

"Stokaline? But, Doctor—"

"Don't argue with me, Nurse. Get it."

Christine turned and went to get the required air hypo. McCoy activated the body function panel over the table and began to take readings, which were obviously low. Tomar hesitated, then moved away to where he could watch from a discreet distance.

Christine came back with the hypo, and at McCoy's nod, administered it, looking at her chief in puzzlement. There was no response from Spock for a moment. Then his eyes snapped open. McCoy shook his head very slightly and the eyes closed again. Over their heads, the readings began to pick up, some of them quickening, others returning to their Vulcan norms, which were almost surely strange to Tomar.

"This may be the turning point, Nurse. Prepare another shot."

"Doctor—"

"Miss Chapel, please follow orders."

She did so, though McCoy was well aware of her mounting puzzlement. He continued to study the panel. Finally he nodded. "That does it. He'll be all right now. Let him rest." He turned to Tomar. "It was a flare-up of Rigelian Kassaba fever. He suffered from it ten years ago, and it recurs now and then. There's no danger if he receives medication in time. He'll be up again in an hour or so."

"Very well. I will inform Rojan. You will stay here."

The Kelvan went out and McCoy went back to the table, grinning at Spock, who was now propped up on his elbows.

"I said I would awaken myself, Doctor. What was that shot you gave me?"

"It wasn't *a* shot. It was two."

"I am not interested in quantity, but in content."

"It was stokaline."

"I am not familiar with that drug. Are there any after effects?"

"Yes. You'll feel much better."

"It's a multiple vitamin compound," Christine said, beginning to look less confused.

McCoy patted Spock's shoulder. "Stop worrying. It'll put a little green in your cheeks. Let's get at the neuroanalyzer."

Spock grimaced and rolled off the table to his feet. "It would be helpful to have Mr Scott here."

"Agreed. Miss Chapel, it is time for Mr Scott's medical exam."

"I'll see that he reports immediately," Christine said demurely.

Hanar summoned Kirk out of the cave and brought him to Rojan, who was lounging comfortably by a lakeside, with Kelinda close by. Rojan waved Hanar away. "Proceed to the ship, Hanar. Rest yourself, Captain."

"What do you want with me now, Rojan?" Kirk said angrily.

"We will beam aboard the vessel shortly. I wish you to understand your duties."

"My duty is to stop you in any way I can."

"You will obey."

"Or you'll kill more of my people?"

"Captain, I cannot believe that you do not understand the importance of my mission," Rojan said slowly, as if trying to explain to an equal. "We Kelvans have a code of honor—harsh, demanding. It calls for much from us, and much from those we conquer. You have been conquered. I respect your devotion to your duty. But I cannot permit it to interfere with mine."

Kirk remained silent, thinking. It was impossible not to be impressed by what seemed to be so much straightforward honesty. It was apparent that that "code" was what Rojan lived by, and that he believed in it unshakably.

It was also impossible to forget the crumbled shards of what had been Yeoman Leslie Thompson, scattered in the grass not far from here.

Kelinda had moved away to a nearby burst of flowers. Rojan watched her, but not, Kirk thought, with any sign of ordinary male interest.

"I hunger to be in space again, Rojan," she said. "But these—these are lovely. Captain Kirk, what is it you call them?"

"Flowers," he said, moving closer to her, cautiously. "I don't know the variety."

"Our memory tapes tell us of such things on Kelva," Rojan said. "Crystals which form with such rapidity that they seem to grow. They look like these; fragile things, somewhat. We call them 'sahsheer.'"

"The rose," Kirk said, "by any other name…"

"Captain?" Rojan said.

"A quotation, from a great human poet, Shakespeare. 'That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.' "

Kelinda bent to smell the flowers, while Kirk studied her. Did this woman in reality have a hundred tentacles, all adapted to different uses? It was hard to imagine.

"Kelinda, Captain, come away," Rojan said. "We must leave now."

Directly they were beamed up, Rojan directed Kirk to take him and Kelinda to the bridge. There, Uhura was at her station, and Chekov at his, but a Kelvan woman was in the Helmsman's seat, and Hanar was standing nearby.

"Drea has computed and laid a course for Kelva, Rojan," Hanar said.

"Sir," said Chekov, "we've jumped to warp eight."

"And we'll go faster yet," Rojan said. Increase speed to warp eleven."

Chekov looked around sharply at Kirk, who could only shrug his helplessness and nod.

"On course and proceeding as planned," said the Kelvan woman at the helm, who was evidently Drea.

"Very well," said Rojan. "Hanar, proceed with the neutralizing operation."

Hanar nodded and went to the elevator. Kirk said quickly: "What neutralizing operation?"

"You humans are troublesome for us, Captain. There are not enough of us to effectively guard all of you all the time. Further, the food synthesizers cannot continue to manufacture food for all of you for our entire journey. We are therefore neutralizing all nonessential personnel."

"No!"

"Captain, you can do nothing to stop it. The procedure is already under way. Now, as to bridge personnel…" He moved toward Uhura. "We have no need of communications for some centuries."

Uhura sat frozen in her chair, staring at Rojan in horror. He touched his belt device—and there was nothing left in her seat but a geometrical solid.

"And since Drea is now capable of doing our navigating—" Chekov too vanished. Drea had already neutralized two crewmen beyond Scott's station. Kirk stood frozen.

"They are not dead, Captain," Rojan reminded him. "They are merely reduced to the sum total of what they are."

"That's very comforting," Kirk said sarcastically. "But not pleasant to watch. I'm going to Sickbay. My First Officer was taken ill."

"Yes, I was informed. Go ahead."

Sickbay was deserted. Kirk found Scott, McCoy and Spock picking at food at a table in the recreation room. Getting himself a tray, he joined them. "Reports, gentlemen?"

"I'm a little sick," McCoy said. "We burned out my neuroanalyzer, to no effect. I saw one of the Kelvans, the one they call Tomar, reduce four of my doctors and nurses to those… little blocks."

"I've seen them do that too. Remember, the process is reversible. I only wonder how far it's going to go."

"I have been checking our table of organization against their apparent capabilities," Spock said. "It appears that we will have very few 'survivors.' They will need none of the security men, for example. And once we cross the energy barrier, Engineering can be reduced to a skeleton crew. Beyond that point lies some three hundred years of straight cruising—at an astonishing velocity, to be sure, but still cruising. And of the officers, it would seem that only we four could be regarded as 'essential.' I am not even sure of your status, Captain, or mine."

"How so?"

"Rojan is in command now."

"Quite so," Kirk said bitterly. "Scotty, have you found out anything about the paralysis projector?"

"Quite a lot, and none of it good. The machine is in Engineering, and it's encased in that same stuff the door of our jail was made of. Furthermore, it's nae a simple machine—and it's the only one of

its kind on board. I think it must be the source of all their special powers—and it's impregnable."

"Any suggestions?"

"One," Scott said. "Self-destruct."

Kirk considered it. "We've been driven to that point, or almost, once before," he said at last. "But aside from my aversion to suicide—and the deaths of everybody else—it's not practicable. We'd never complete the routine with the computer before Rojan paralyzed us."

"I thought of that," Scott said. "I could do it myself, though. Remember that we've got to cross the energy barrier. It willna be easy at best. A little sabotage in the matter-antimatter nacelles, and we'd blow, for good and all."

Kirk made a quick silencing gesture. Tomar had come in, and was now approaching them, staring curiously at their trays.

"I do not understand," he said, "why you go to the trouble of consuming this bulk material to sustain yourselves." He pulled a flat pillbox from a pocket and opened it. "These contain all the required nutritional elements."

"Not for human forms," McCoy said. "Bulk is necessary to our digestive systems, and there's a limit to the amount of energy that can be crammed into a pill, too. Perhaps you haven't been in human form long enough to find just pills debilitating, but you will—you will."

"Indeed? Then you had better show me promptly what else we shall need, and how to manage it."

McCoy looked rebellious and Kirk himself felt a hope die almost before it had been born. "I think you'd better, Bones," he said.

"All right. Come on, I'll show you how to work the selector." McCoy led Tomar off toward the wall dispenser.

"Spock," Kirk said in a whisper, "shall we self-destruct? Crossing the barrier may be our last chance to do so."

"Granted," Spock whispered back. "But it is said on Earth that while there is life, there is hope. That is sound logic: no multivalued problem has only one solution."

"Well, we couldn't knock out their central machine even if we were able. It has to be kept intact to restore the rest of our people to human form."

There was quite a long silence. McCoy had settled Tomar at a table with a tray, and Tomar was gingerly forking some meat into his mouth. Judging by his nod, he found it agreeable, and he

began eating at a fair speed for a newcomer to the habit. McCoy grinned and rejoined his colleagues.

"I'm almost sorry I did that," he said. "It looks like he likes food—and I wouldn't want any of them to enjoy anything."

Spock continued to watch Tomar. "Most peculiar."

"What is?" Kirk said.

"The isolated glimpses of things I saw when I touched Kelinda's mind are beginning to coalesce in my consciousness. The Kelvans have superior intellectual capacity. But to gain it, they apparently sacrificed many things that would tend to distract them. Among these are the pleasures of the senses—and, of course, emotions."

"But then, Tomar shouldn't be enjoying the taste of food."

"He has taken human form," Spock said, "and is having human reactions."

Kirk's mind leapt ahead in response. "If they all respond to stimulation of the senses, maybe we could confuse them. They don't know how to handle those senses yet. If we can distract them enough, we could try to get the belt devices away. That's their only hold on us."

"It seems reasonable," Spock said.,

"All right. We watch for opportunities to work on them—hit them every way we can think of."

Scott was studying Tomar. "I can think of one way right off," he said. He rose and went to the Kelvan. "Lad, you'll be needing something to wash that down with. Have you ever tried Saurian brandy?"

McCoy stopped Hanar as the Kelvan was passing by the door to the examination room. "Come on in a moment, please, Hanar."

"What is it, human?"

"I've noticed you're not looking too well."

"Impossible. We do not malfunction, as do you humans."

"No? You're forgetting you're in a human body. And that does malfunction—that's why Rojan considers me essential. You look pale." He gestured to the table. "Sit up there."

When Hanar complied, McCoy picked up his medical tricorder and began taking readings. "Uh huh… Hmmm… I don't know about that… Hmmmm."

"Please articulate, human."

"Well, it looks to me like this body of yours is getting a little anemic, and has some other subclinical deficiencies. Comes from taking your food in pills, instead of good solid substance." He turned aside and picked up a hypo, which he set.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to give you a shot—high potency vitamin-mineral concentrate. You'll have to have one three times a day for a few days. And eat some solid food."

It had taken Scott a while to get Tomar down to serious drinking; initially he had been too interested in the tartan, the claymore, the armorial bearings on the walls, the standing suit of ancient armor in Scott's quarters, all of which he declared nonfunctional in a starship. He did not seem to grasp either the concept of mementos or that of decoration.

Finally, however, they were seated at Scott's desk with a bottle and glasses between them. After a while, it was two bottles. Tomar seemed to remain in total control of himself, as if he'd been drinking lemonade. "No more?" he said.

"Well… no more Saurian brandy, but…" Scott looked around and found another bottle. "Now, y'see, this liquor is famous on Ahbloron—I mean, Aldibib-ble—on one of these planets we go to."

"It is a different color from the other."

"Yes. And stronger, too." He poured some into Tomar's glass with an unsteady hand, and then, perforce, some into his own. Somehow this experiment was not working out right.

Kirk paid a call on the cabin Kelinda had commandeered. When she invited him in, he found her looking at a tape on a viewscreen. "Did I disturb you?"

"Disturb? What is it you wish?"

He went over to her. "I want to apologize."

"I do not understand, Captain."

"For hitting you. I wanted to say I was sorry."

"That is not necessary. You attempted to escape, as we would have. That I was taken in by your ruse is my fault, not yours."

Kirk smiled and reached out to touch her face gently. "I don't usually hit beautiful women."

"Why not, if there is need?"

"Because there are better things for men and women to do." He moved the hand down to her neck. "Was it here that I hit you?"

"No, on the other side."

"Oh." He leaned to the other side, kissed her neck, and nuzzled her ear. "Is that better?"

"Better? Was it intended to be a remedy?"

"This is." Drawing her to her feet, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

After a moment she drew back. "Is there some significance to this action?"

"It was meant to express… well, among humans it; shows warmth, love—"

"Oh. You are trying to seduce me," she said, as if she were reading a weather report. "I have been read-ing about you."

"Me?"

"Humans. This business of love. You have devoted much literature to it. Why have you built such a mystique around a simple biological fact?"

"We enjoy it"

"The literature?"

"Kelinda, I'm sorry I brought the subject up."

"Did you regard this contact of the lips as pleasurable?"

Kirk sighed. "I did."

"Curious. I wonder why." Abruptly she put her arms around him and kissed him back.

The door opened and Rojan came in. Kirk made a point of drawing back with guilty swiftness.

"Is there some problem, Captain?" Rojan said.

"None." Kirk left quickly. Rojan stared after him.

"What did he want here?"

"He came to apologize for hitting me," Kelinda said. "Apparently, it involves some peculiar touching contacts."

"In what manner?"

Kelinda hesitated, then reached up to nibble at Rojan's neck and ear. Rojan stepped away from her, frowning.

"They are odd creatures, these humans. Please have the reports on fuel consumption relayed to Sub-commander Hanar as soon as possible."

Spock had taught Rojan to play chess; the Kelvan had learned with breathtaking speed. They were playing now, in the recreation room.

"Yes, they are peculiar," Spock said, moving a piece. "I very often find them unfathomable, but an interesting psychological study."

Rojan moved in return. "I do not understand this business of biting someone's neck to apologize."

Spock looked up, raising his eyebrows. Then he looked back at the game, saw an opening and quickly moved another piece. "I believe you are referring to a kiss. But it is my understanding that such, uh, apologies are usually exchanged between two people who have some affection for each other."

"Kelinda has no affection for Captain Kirk," Rojan said quickly.

Spock studied Rojan's next move and shook his head. "You seemed disturbed about the incident Your game is off."

"Why should I be disturbed?"

"It seems to me you have known Kelinda for some time. She is a Kelvan, as you are. Among humans, I have found the symptoms you are displaying would be indicative of jealousy."

"I have no reason for such a reaction. Kelinda is a female. Nothing more."

"Captain Kirk seems to find her quite attractive."

"Of course she is."

"But you are not jealous."

"No!"

"Nor upset."

"Certainly not!"

Spock made his move. "Checkmate."

Kirk, Spock and McCoy were holding another council of war in the recreation room. Kirk was depressed. "The thing is, I can't tell if we're getting; anywhere. And I haven't seen Scotty for what seems like months."

'"You haven't seen Tomar either," McCoy said. "But the point is, these things take time. The Kelvans started out with adapted human bodies in superb physical shape—textbook cases, as Spock

said. They have high resistance. I've been giving Hanar shots that would have driven our whole crew up the wall in an hour. He responds slowly—but he's getting more irritable by the minute, now."

"And Rojan," Spock said, "has exhibited symptoms of jealousy toward Kelinda and you."

"What about Kelinda, Jim?" McCoy said.

"No progress," Kirk said, uncomfortably.

"What approach did you take with her? Could be you're a little rusty—"

Kirk felt himself begin to bristle. Spock interposed smoothly: "I would say it is sufficient that Rojan is jealous."

"Right," Kirk said quickly. "That's the opening wedge. As soon as it's a little wider, we move."

Behind Kirk, Kelinda's voice said: "I would like to speak with you, Captain."

Spock stood up at once. "Doctor, I think I need another dose of stokaline."

"Huh?" McCoy said. "Oh, yes. Pardon us."

They went out. Kirk leaned back in his chair and studied Kelinda. "You had something to say?"

"Yes." Did she really seem a trifle uncomfortable, even perhaps awkward? Kirk waited. Then she took a deep breath and touched him, lightly, on a shoulder. "This cultural mystique surrounding a biological function…"

"Yes?"

"You realize it really is quite overdone."

"Oh. Quite."

"However, I was wondering… would you please apologize to me again?"

Rojan was in the command chair. Behind him, the elevator doors snapped open, and then Hanar's voice said, with surprising belligerence: "Rojan. I want to talk to you."

Rojan looked up in surprise. "Very well, Hanar."

"First, I do not like the way responsibility and duty have been portioned out to us."

"It is the way your duties have always been assigned."

"And that is my second quarrel with you. It was always unjust—"

Rojan snapped out of the chair. "Hanar—"

"And further, I do not care much for the autocratic way you order us about on this ship, which we captured, not you—"

"Confine yourself to your quarters!"

Hanar hesitated, as though he had had a lot more to say, but had thought better of it. Then he spun on his heel and left without further acknowledgment.

Rojan found his own fists clenching in anger—and was suddenly aware that Drea was watching him in amazement from the navigator's station. As Rojan turned his back to hide his expression, Spock came onto the bridge and went toward his library-computer. Rojan followed.

"You were not called to the bridge, Spock. What is your purpose here?"

"Sensors and various other recording devices require monitoring and certain adjustments."

"Very well, proceed… Have you seen Captain Kirk?"

"Do you want him? I will call him to the bridge."

"No. I… wondered where he was."

"Dr McCoy and I left him some time ago in the recreation room."

"He was alone, then?"

"No. Kelinda was with him. She seemed most anxious to speak to him."

"I told him to stay away from her."

"It would appear that you have little control over her, sir… or perhaps Captain Kirk has more."

Rojan turned abruptly and headed for the elevator.

Kirk and Kelinda were locked in a kiss when Rojan came through the recreation room door. Kirk looked up, but did not release Kelinda entirely; instead he kept a possessive arm around her as he turned toward Rojan. Rojan stopped and stared.

"Kelinda, I told you to avoid this human!"

"I did not wish to," she said.

"I am your commander."

"I've found," Kirk said, "that doesn't mean much to a woman if she's bound to go her own way."

"You have done this to her! Corrupted her—turned her away from me!"

"If you couldn't keep her, Rojan, that's not *my* problem."

Furiously, Rojan leaped at Kirk. He seemed to have forgotten all about the belt device, his bare hands reaching out. Kirk pushed Kelinda aside and met Rojan's rush.

The two men, equally powerful, slammed at each other like bulls. Rojan was more clumsy, more unaccustomed to the body he was in. Kirk was the quicker and the more adept fighter, but he was not possessed by the anger which obviously drove Rojan.

Kelinda did not intervene; she only watched. After a moment she was joined by Spock and McCoy.

Kirk delivered a final punch that sent Rojan spinning down, backward. But he was not beaten yet. He started to climb back to his feet.

"Rojan—wait!" Kirk said. "Listen to me-"

Rojan flung himself forward, but Kirk fended him off. "Listen! Why didn't you use your paralyzer? Don't you know why? Because you've become a human yourself." Kirk ducked a punch. "Look at you—brawling like a street fighter—shaking with rage—"

Rojan paused and stared as the words began to sink in. "What?"

"You thought I took your woman away from you. You were jealous—and you wanted to kill me with your bare hands. Would a Kelvan have done that? Would he *have* to? You reacted with the emotions of a human, Rojan. You are one."

"No! We cannot be."

"You have no choice. You chose this ship. Because of its environmental systems, you had to take human form to use it. And you're stuck with it—you and your descendants—for the next three hundred years. Look what's happened to you in the short time you've been exposed to us. What do you think will happen in three hundred years? When this ship gets to Kelva, the people on it will be aliens, the Kelvans their enemies.

"We have a mission. We must carry it out." But Rojan's tone showed that he was shaken.

"Your mission was to find worlds for your people to live on. You can still do that. I told you we could present your case to the Federation. I know it would be sympathetic. There are many unpopulated planets in our galaxy. You could develop them in peace, your way."

"They would do that? You would extend welcome to invaders?"

"No. But we do welcome friends."

"Perhaps," said Rojan, "perhaps it could be done."

Spock said: "A robot ship could be sent back to Kelva with the Federation proposal."

"But what of us?" Rojan said. "If we… if we retain this form, where can we find a place?"

"Seems to me," McCoy said, "that little planet you were on was kind of a nice place."

"Pleasant… but…"

"The Federation would probably grant a colonization permit to a small group of people who desired to settle there," Spock said. "You do represent an old and highly intelligent race."

Rojan turned to Kelinda and jerked his head at Kirk. "You would want to go with him?"

Kelinda glanced at Kirk and then back at Rojan. "As you have said, he is not our kind. I believe I owe you an apology." She kissed him. "It *is* pleasurable, Rojan."

"You know, Rojan," Kirk said, "one of the advantages of being a human is being able to appreciate beauty… of a flower, or of a woman. Unless you'd rather conquer a galaxy?"

"No, Captain, I would rather not." Rojan took Kelinda's hand. "A link in a chain—that's all we were. Perhaps there is an opportunity for us to be more." He turned away, crossed the room and activated an intercom. "Bridge, this is Rojan."

"Yes, Commander," said Drea's voice.

"Turn the ship. We are returning to the alien… We are returning home."

"Sir?"

"Turn the ship about."

He led Kelinda out. Kirk, Spock and McCoy expelled simultaneous sighs of relief.

"Jim, I was coming to tell you—"

"Yes, Bones?"

"I found Scotty in his room with Tomar. Apparently they've been having a drinking bout all this time. They were both under the table—but Tomar went down first. Scott had Tomar's belt device in his hand. He just never made it to the door with it."

Kirk grinned. "The Kelvans," he said, "still have a lot to learn about being human, don't they?"

RETURN TO TOMORROW

(Gene Roddenberry and John T. Dugan)

The readings were coming from a star system directly ahead of the *Enterprise.* And havoc is what they were causing. The Starship's distress relays had been activated. All its communication channels had been affected. A direction to follow had even been specified, but no clear signal had been received. Yet one fact was clear: someone or something was trying to attract the Enterprise's attention. Who? Or what? Those were the questions.

Over at Spock's station, Kirk said, "Well?"

"I don't know, Captain."

Despite his exasperation, Kirk smiled. "I never heard you use those words before, Mr Spock."

"Not even a Vulcan can know the unknown, sir," Spock said stiffly. "We're hundreds of light years past where any Earth ship has ever explored."

"Planet dead ahead, Captain!" Sulu called. "Becoming visual."

The screen showed what appeared to be a very dead planet: scarred, shrunken, a drifting cadaver of a world.

Uhura turned from her board. "That planet is the source of whatever it is we have been receiving, sir."

Spock, his head bent to his hooded viewer, announced, "Class M planet, sir. Oblate spheroid, ratio 1 to 296. Mean density 5.53. Mass .9." He paused. "Close resemblance to Earth conditions with two very important differences. It's much older than Earth. And about half a million years ago its atmosphere was totally ripped away by some cataclysm. Sensors detect no life of any kind."

Without warning the bridge was suddenly filled by the sound of a voice, resonant, its rich deepness profoundly impressive. "*Captain Kirk*" it said, "*all your questions will be answered in time.*"

The bridge people stared at the screen. Kirk, turning to Uhura, said, "Are your hailing frequencies freed yet, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir."

They had sped past the planet now. Eyes on the screen, Kirk said, "Maintain present course, Mr Sulu."

The deep voice spoke again. *"I am Sargon. It is the energy of my thoughts which has touched your instruments and directed you here."*

"Then, can you hear me?" Kirk asked. "Who are you, Sargon?"

"Please assume a standard orbit around our planet, Captain."

"Are you making a request or demand?" Kirk said.

"The choice is yours. I read what is in your mind: words are unnecessary."

"If you can read my mind, you must know I am wondering just who and what you are. The planet we've just passed is dead; there is no possibility of life there as we understand life."

"And I," said the voice, *"am as dead as my planet. Does that frighten you, Captain? If it does, you will let what is left of me perish."* An awesome solemnity had entered the voice. *"Then, all of you, my children—all of mankind will…"*

The voice faded as the Starship moved out of the planet's range. Sulu, turning to Kirk, said, "Do we go on, sir—or do I turn the ship back?"

Kirk could feel all eyes centered on him. Then Spock spoke from his station. "There's only one possible explanation, sir. Pure thought? the emanations of a fantastically powerful mind."

Kirk paced the distance from his chair to the main viewing screen. "Whatever it is, we're beyond its range."

"And out of danger," Spock said dryly.

"You don't recommend going back?"

"If a mind of that proportion should want to harm us, sir, we could never hope to cope with it."

"It called me—us 'my children,' " Kirk said. "What could that mean?"

"Again, sir—I don't know."

Kirk sank down in his command chair, frowning. Then his brow cleared. "All right," he said. "Take us back, Mr Sulu. Standard orbit around the planet."

The dead world gradually reappeared on the screen, its color the hue of dead ash. Sulu said, "Entering standard orbit, Captain."

Kirk nodded, eyes on the screen. Then he hit the button of his command recorder, dictating. "Since exploration and contact with alien intelligence is our primary mission, I have decided to risk the

dangers potential in our current situation—and resume contact with this strange planet. Log entry out." Snapping off the recorder, he spoke to Uhura. "How long before Starfleet receives that?"

"Over three weeks at this distance, sir. A month and a half before we receive their answer."

Kirk left his chair to cross to Spock's station. The Vulcan was swiftly manipulating dials.

"Got something?" Kirk said.

"Sensors registering some form of energy, sir… deep *inside* the planet."

Sargon's voice came once more. "*Your probes have touched me, Mr Spock.*"

Spock looked up at Kirk. "I read energy only, sir. No life form."

Then again Sargon spoke. "*I have locked your transporter device on my coordinates. Please come to us. Rescue us from oblivion.*"

Spock, imperturbable, lifted his head from his viewer's mound. "It came from deep under the planet surface, Captain… from under at least a hundred miles of solid rock."

Kirk began, "We can't beam—"

Sargon addressed the half-spoken thought in his mind. "*I will make it possible for your transporter to beam you that deep beneath the surface. Have no fear.*"

Spock, concentrating on his viewer, said, "I read a chamber beneath the surface, sir. Oxygen-nitrogen suitable for human life support."

Kirk gave himself a long moment. Then he spoke to Uhura. "Lieutenant, have Dr McCoy report to the Transporter Room in ten minutes with standard landing-party equipment."

"Aye, sir."

"Captain," Spock said, "I am most curious to inspect whatever it is that has survived half a million years—this entity which has outlived its cataclysmic experience."

Kirk laid a hand on his shoulder. "And I'd like my Science Officer with me on something as unusual as this. But it's so full of unknowns, we can't risk the absence of both of us from the ship."

The bridge was instantly plunged into total darkness. All panel hum stilled. Sulu hit a switch. "Power's gone, sir! *Totally* gone!"

There had been no menace in the deep voice. A tone of pleading, yes—but no menace. Kirk frowned, pondering. Then he

said, "On the other hand, Mr Spock, perhaps this 'Sargon' wants you to come along with me."

Lights flashed back on. Panels hummed again. Sulu, checking his board, cried, "All normal, sir! No damage at all."

"Well," Kirk said. "Then that's that. Mr Spock, you'll transport down with us." As he strode to the elevator, he turned to add, "Mr Sulu, you have the con."

A young woman, dark and slim, had followed McCoy into the Transporter Room. Kirk recognized her—Lieutenant Commander Anne Mulhall, astrobiologist. His eyes took in the figure, the startling sapphire of the eyes under the raven-black hair. He hadn't remembered her as so attractive. She lowered her eyes, checking her equipment, two security guards beside her. Nor did she look up as McCoy said tartly, "Jim, why no briefing on this? I'd like at least to know—"

Kirk interrupted. "Easy, Bones. If you know 'something is down there,' you know as much as we do. The rest is only guesses."

Scott, over at the Transporter console, spoke. "I don't like it, Captain. Your coordinates preset by an alien of some unknown variety. You could materialize inside solid rock."

"*Inside solid rock!* McCoy shouted.

Spock, moving in beside Scott, said, "Unlikely, Doctor. The coordinates correspond to a chamber that sensor readings detected on the bridge."

"It is my feeling," Kirk said, "that they or it could destroy us standing right here if it wanted to, Mr Scott."

Anne spoke for the first time. " 'They' or 'it?" she said.

Kirk looked at her. "Lieutenant Commander, may I ask what you're doing here in this room?"

"I was ordered to report for landing-party duty, sir."

"By whom?"

"I…" She smiled. "It's strange, sir. I'm not sure."

There was a moment's pause. Then, flushing, she added. "I do not lie, Captain. I *did* receive an order to report here."

Spock intervened. "I'm sure she did, Captain. Just as you received an order to take me along."

Kirk nodded; and McCoy said, "Let's get back to this solid-rock business. How much rock are we going through?"

Spock answered. "Exactly one hundred, twelve point three seven miles below the surface, Doctor."

"*Miles?*" McCoy echoed blankly. "Jim, he's joking!"

But Kirk was assigning Transporter positions to the party. They were taking their places when the console lights abruptly flashed on and Sargon's voice said, "*Please stand ready, I will operate the controls*"

Kirk spoke in reaction to the shock in McCoy's face. "If you'd prefer to stay behind, Bones…"

McCoy eyed him. "No—no, if I'd be useful, and I may have to be, that is, as long as you're beaming down, Jim…" He shrugged. "I might as well have a medical look at whatever this is."

Kirk joined them on the platform. "Energize!" he called to Scott.

The dematerializing shimmer broke them into glittering fragments—all of them except the two security guards. They were left standing, unaffected, on the platform, their faces astounded. Scott stared at them, his face drawing into lines of worry.

The selected group materialized in a metallic vault, some sort of antechamber, its luminescent walls diffusing a softly radiant glow. Spock was the first to realize the absence of the security guards.

Kirk nodded at his comment. "Somebody down here doesn't like them," he said. He opened his communicator. "Kirk here, Scotty."

"Can you read me, Captain?"

"I shouldn't be able to, not from this deep inside the planet. Perhaps that's been arranged for us, too. Is the security team up there?"

"They're fine, Captain. They just didn't dematerialize. I don't like it, sir."

"No problems here yet. Maintain alert. Captain out."

Anne and Spock had been circling the vault with their tricorders. The girl said, "Atmosphere report, Captain. A fraction richer in oxygen than usual for us, but otherwise normal."

Spock had applied his tricorder to a wall. "This vault was fabricated about a half-million years ago. About the same time that the planet surface was destroyed."

"Walls' composition?"

"A substance or alloy quite unknown to me, sir. Much stronger and harder than anything I ever measured."

"All readings go off the scale, sir," Anne said.

"The air's fresh," McCoy said, sniffing. "Must be re-circulated somehow."

"For us? Or does 'it' need fresh air?"

As if in reply, the fourth wall of the vault slid back. They recoiled. Ahead of them was a vast room. It was starkly bare, empty except for a large slab of veinless white stone, supported by four plain standards of the same immaculate stone. On it stood a big translucent globe, brilliantly lit from within. The group followed Kirk into the room; but as Spock stepped forward to take a tricorder reading of the globe, he was halted by the sound of Sargon's voice, still deep but no longer resonant.

"*Welcome,*" said the globe. "*I am Sargon.*"

Once more Spock focused his tricorder. "Sargon, would you mind if I—?"

"*You may use your tricorder, Mr Spock. Your readings will show energy but no substance. Sealed in this receptacle is the essence of my mind.*"

Spock took his readings. Then he backed up to Kirk so that he, too, could see them. Kirk gave a low whistle of amazement. "Impossible, Spock! A being of pure energy without matter or form!"

McCoy addressed the globe. "But you once had a body of some type?"

"*Although our minds were infinitely greater, my body was much as yours, my children.*"

Kirk spoke slowly. "That is the second time you have called us your 'children'."

"*Because it is probable you are our descendants, Captain. Six thousand centuries ago our vessels were colonizing this galaxy just as your own Starships are now exploring it. As you leave your seed on distant planets, so we left our seed behind us.*"

Anne protested: "Our studies indicate that our planet Earth evolved independently." But Spock, his face unusually preoccupied, said, "That would explain many enigmas in Vulcan pre-history."

"*There is no certainty. It was so long ago that the records of our travels were lost in the catastrophe we loosed upon ourselves.*"

Kirk said, "A war?"

"*A struggle for goals that unleashed a power you cannot even comprehend.*"

"Then perhaps your intelligence was deficient, Sargon." Kirk stepped toward the globe. "We faced a crisis like that at the beginning of the Nuclear Age. But we found the wisdom not to destroy ourselves."

"*We survived our primitive Nuclear Era, my son. But there comes to all races an ultimate crisis which you have yet to face.*"

"I should like to understand," Kirk said. "I do not."

"*The mind of man can become so powerful that he forgets he is man. He confuses himself with God.*"

Kirk's mind was awhirl. Was this being speaking of the Lucifer sin? Abruptly, he felt a completed trust of Sargon. He moved to the globe with the confidence of a child to a parent. "You said you needed help. What is it you wish?"

A strange thrilling sound echoed through the room. In the globe, light fluctuated, growing brighter and brighter. Then a flare broke from it. It transfixed Kirk, holding him immobile. At the same instant light in the globe dimmed to a tiny flicker. It was clear to the others that the essence of what was in the globe had transferred itself to Kirk—and vanished into him.

McCoy started forward, but Spock put out a restraining hand. "Patience, Doctor. Let's wait a moment."

Kirk stood rigid, stiffened, his eyes shut. It seemed centuries to McCoy before they opened, "*Jim?*" he said. "Jim…"

Kirk spoke. "I am… Sargon."

His voice had deepened. And his bearing had changed, permeated as by the calm, gently austere dignity that had characterized the personality of Sargon.

McCoy yelled, "*Where's our Captain? Where's Jim Kirk?*"

"Here, Bones." The voice of Sargon-Kirk was gentle as a mother soothing a frightened infant. "Your beloved Captain is unharmed. I have taken his body for the moment to demonstrate to you—"

McCoy had drawn his phaser. "No! No, I do not go along with this! Back where you were, Sargon, whatever you are!"

"What do you propose to do with your phaser?" It was the mild voice of Spock. "That's still Jim's body."

McCoy's shoulders slumped. Then he saw that the incorporated Sargon was slowly becoming aware of Kirk's body. It expanded its chest; its head was flung up as the deliciousness of air was inhaled; its arms flexed—and a cry burst from it.

"Lungs… lungs savoring breath again! Eyes seeing colors again! A heart pumping arteries surging with young blood!" A hand

touched the other one in wonder. "To *feel* again after half a million years!" Kirk's body turned, his own smile on its lips. "Your Captain has an excellent corpus, Doctor! I compliment both of you on the condition in which it has been maintained."

"And your plans for it?" Spock's voice was toneless. "Can you exchange places again when you wish?"

Sargon-Kirk didn't answer. Instead, he moved to the receptacle with its frail glow of light. Pointing to it, he said, "Have no fear. Your Captain is quite unharmed in there." The dim flicker slightly brightened. "See? He hears, he knows, he is aware of all we do and say. But his mind cannot generate the energy to speak from the globe as I did."

Spock, who had been using his tricorder, called "Doctor!" McCoy paled as he saw its readings. "The creature is killing him!" he shouted. "Heartbeat almost double, temperature one hundred and four degrees!"

"Sargon, what is it you want of us?" Spock demanded.

Kirk's eyes studied them silently. Finally Sargon's words came. "There are other receptacles in the next room; they contain two more of us who have survived. You, Anne Mulhall, and you, Mr Spock—we shall require your bodies for them. We must have your bodies and Captain Kirk's in order to live again."

It had come to all of them that Kirk was no longer Kirk but an individual stronger, wiser, infused with a dominant intelligence beyond the reach of any of them. Waved into the next room, they obediently moved into it. Its shelved walls held many receptacles; but of them all, only two still shone with light. Kirk's deeper voice said, "Yes, only two of us still live. The others are blackened by death but these two still shine—Hanoch and Thalassa." He caressed one of the lighted globes. "Thalassa, my Thalassa, I am pleased you survived with me. Half a million years have been almost too long to wait."

Spock said, "Sargon, when that struggle came that destroyed your planet…"

"A few of the best minds were chosen to survive. We built these chambers and preserved our essence here in this fashion." He touched the Thalassa globe with tenderness. "My wife, as you may have guessed. And Hanoch from the other, enemy side in the struggle. By then we had all realized our mistake."

He paused. "We knew the seeds we had planted on other planets had taken root. And we knew you would one day build vessels as we did—that you would come here."

"What was your task in that globe out there?" Spock said.

To search the heavens with my mind… probing, waiting, probing. And finally my mind touched something—your ship bringing you here."

"So you could thieve our bodies from us!" Anne cried.

He looked at her, the centuries of gathered wisdom in his eyes contrasting eerily with the youth of Kirk's face. "To steal your bodies? No, no. You misunderstand, my children. To *borrow* them. We ask you to only lend them to us for a short time."

"To *destroy* them!" cried McCoy. "Just as you're burning that one up right now! Spock, the heartbeat reading is now 262! And the whole metabolic rate is just as high! My medical tricorder—"

"I shall return your Captain's body before its limit has been reached, Doctor."

"What is the purpose of this borrowing?" Spock said.

"To build…" Suddenly, Sargon-Kirk swayed. Then he straightened. To build humanoid robots. We must borrow your bodies only long enough to have the use of your hands, your fingers."

Spock turned to the others. "I understand," he said. "They will construct mechanical bodies for themselves and move their minds into them. That accomplished, they will return our bodies to us."

Anne interposed. "We have engineers, technicians. Why can't they build the robot bodies for you?"

"No. Our methods, the skill required, goes far beyond your abilities." He swayed again, staggering, and Spock put out an arm to support him. His breath, was coining hard and the Vulcan had to stoop to hear his whisper. "It is… time. Help me back to your… Captain."

With McCoy at his other side, he stumbled back into the big bare room. Weakly, he waved them aside to stand alone by the receptacle, eyes closed. This time the flare of light flashed from him—and abruptly, the globe was again alive with a pulsating brilliance. The knees of the borrowed body gave way and Anne Mulhall rushed to it, her arms outstretched. They closed around its shoulders and its eyelids fluttered open. "Captain Kirk?" she said tentatively.

The skipper of the *Enterprise* smiled at her, his eyes on her face.

"Jim… is it you?" cried McCoy.

Kirk didn't speak, his gaze still deep in the sapphire eyes. Hurriedly, McCoy checked him with his medical tricorder. "Good—

good, fine! Metabolic rate back to normal!"

Spock went to him. "Captain, do you remember what happened? Do you remember any part of it?"

"What? Oh. Oh, yes, yes. Sargon borrowed my body." He gestured to the globe. "I was there, floating… floating in time and space."

"You take it damned casually!" McCoy said. "However, you don't seem harmed… physically at least."

Kirk, wholly himself again, suddenly seemed to realize how matter-of-factly he was accepting his extraordinary experience. "Spock, I remember all now! As Sargon and I exchanged—for an instant we were one. I know him. I know now exactly what he is and what he wants. *And I do not fear him.*"

Anne had withdrawn her embrace. "Captain, I'm afraid I must agree with Dr McCoy. You could be suffering mental effects from this—a kind of euphoria."

"There's a way to check my conviction about Sargon." He turned to Spock. "I—I hate to ask it, Mr Spock, knowing as I do what it costs you."

"Vulcan mind-melding?" McCoy said. "Are you willing, Spock?"

Spock took time to answer. Finally, he nodded gravely. Then, with care, he began to ready himself for the ordeal, breathing deeply, massaging chest muscles. Kirk, turning to the globe, said, "Sargon, we—"

"I understand. I am prepared."

It began. The globe's brilliance increased and, with it, the strain on Spock's anguished concentration. His breath grew harsh and his neck muscles taut. Words started to come like those of a man in a dream or a nightmare. "? there is a world… not physical. The mind reaches . . grows to encompass… to understand beyond understanding… growing… beyond comprehension… beyond… beyond… beyond..."

Kirk flashed an alarmed look at McCoy. It had never been so hard. They started forward—but Spock himself was now breaking away from the meld. He drew a deep lungful of breath, shaking, weak, eyes dazed.

"Spock?" Kirk cried.

The voice still held the awe of inexpressible experience. "Captain, I cannot say… what I have seen. The—the knowledge… the beauty of perfect reason… the incredible goodness… the unbelievable glory of ageless wisdom… the pure goodness of what Sargon is…"

Anne was the first to break the silence. "Beauty? Perfect reason? Pure goodness?"

Kirk nodded. "Beyond imagination."

Spock, still shaken, whispered, "It… will take me… time to absorb all I have learned… all I have felt

"Yes," Kirk said. Instinctively he turned to the receptacle. "Sargon…" he said. The word might have been "Father".

"I understand, my son. Go to your vessel. All who are involved must agree to this. After all these centuries, we can wait a few more hours."

McCoy strode to the globe. "And if we decide against you?"

"Then you may go as freely as you came."

Leonard McCoy was out of his depth. He looked from Spock to Kirk, feeling himself to be the alien in a world no longer familiar to him. He had never been so uncertain of himself in his life.

"You are going to *what?*"

Scott had leaned over the Briefing Room table, his face incredulous. Kirk, quite composed, sat beside the grim-jawed McCoy. He smiled at Scott; and his Chief Engineer, Highland blood boiling, cried, "Are they all right in the head, Doctor?"

"No comment," McCoy said.

"It's a simple transference of our minds and theirs, Scotty," Kirk said.

"Nothing to it," McCoy said. "It happens every day."

Kirk ignored him. "I want your approval, Scotty. You'll have to do all the work with them, furnishing all they need to build the android robots. That is, you'll only seem to be working with us—with our bodies. But they'll be inside of them and we will be…" The explanation was getting complicated. Kirk flinched under the cold Scottish steel of Scott's eyes. "We'll be… in their receptacles," he finished lamely.

He sounded mad to his own ears. Where had fled that supremely sane self-possession of Sargon's that his body had entertained so briefly? He struggled to recover some shred of it; and McCoy cried, "Where they'll be, Scott, is floating in a ball! Just drifting sweetly in a ball of nothing! Indecent is what it is—indecent!"

Spock spoke. "Once inside their robot forms, Engineer, they will restore our bodies. They can leave this planet and travel back with

us. With their massive knowledge, mankind can leap ahead ten thousand years."

"Bones," Kirk said, "they'll show us medical miracles you've never dreamed possible. And engineering advances, Scotty! Vessels this size with engines no larger than a walnut!"

"You're joking," Scott said gruffly.

"No," Spock said. "I myself saw that and more in Sargon's mind. I encountered an infinity of a goodness and knowledge that—that at this moment still staggers me."

"Many a fine man crushes ants underfoot without even knowing it." McCoy's voice shook. "They're giants and we're insects beside them, Jim. They could destroy us without meaning to."

Scott was musing aloud. "A Starship engine the size of a walnut?" He shrugged. "Impossible. But I suppose there's no harm in looking over diagrams on it…"

"And all he wants for these miracles is the body of our ship's Captain," McCoy said. "And that of our next in command, too. Coincidence? Anybody want to bet?"

"They have selected us, Bones, as the most compatible bodies."

"And your attitude on that, Dr Mulhall?" McCoy demanded.

"If we all agree," Anne said steadily, "I am willing to host Thalassa's mind. I am a scientist. The opportunity is an extraordinary one for experimentation and observation."

"Bones, you can stop this right now by voting 'no'. That's why I called you all here. We'll all be deeply involved. It must be unanimous."

McCoy slammed the table. "Then I still want one question answered! *Why?* Not a list of possible miracles—but an understandable, simple, basic 'why' that doesn't ignore all the possible dangers. Let's not kid ourselves! There's much danger potential in this thing!"

They used to say, Bones, that if man were meant to fly, he'd have wings. But he *did* fly." Kirk's voice deepened with his earnestness. "In fact, human existence has been a long story of faint-hearted warnings not to push any further, not to learn, not to strive, not to grow. I don't believe we can stop, Bones. Do you want to return to the days when your profession operated with scalpels—and sewed up the patients with catgut?"

He paused, looking at the faces around the table. "Yes, I'm in command. I can order this. I haven't done so. Dr McCoy is performing his duty. He is right to point out the enormous danger potential in such close contact with intelligence as fantastically

advanced as this. *My* point is that the potential for new knowledge is also enormous. Risk is our business. That's what this Starship is all about! It is why we're aboard her!"

He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes searching faces. "You may dissent without prejudice. Do I hear a negative vote?"

There was none. He rose to his feet. "Mr Scott, stand by to bring the three receptacles aboard."

In Sickbay the three beds had been arranged for Kirk, Spock, and Anne. A shining globe had been placed beside each one. McCoy, Christine Chapel beside him, stood at the body-function panels, his clipboard in hand. He turned to the nurse. "You must know," he said, "that with the transfer, the extreme power of the alien minds will drive heart action dangerously high. All body functions will race at many times normal metabolism. These panels must be monitored most carefully."

The situation had shaken Christine. She made a successful effort to recover her professionalism. "Yes, sir," she said.

McCoy spoke to Kirk. "We're about as ready as we'll ever be."

Kirk turned his head to the globe beside him. "Ready, Sargon."

There came the thrilling sound preceding transfer. The three globes grew active, light building and fluctuating inside them. Then the three flares flashed from them to the bodies lying on the beds. Anne's trembled as Thalassa entered it. Christine moved quickly to check it. Hanoch-Spock sat up, stretching in delight at the feel of a body. Beside each bed the globes' light had dimmed to a faint flicker. McCoy was concentrated on Kirk's body-function panel; and Christine, leaving Thalassa-Anne, moved in to check Hanoch-Spock. To her amazement, he smiled at her, his eyes taking her in with lusty appreciation. Where was the cool, cerebral Spock?

She turned hastily to his body panel. What she read alarmed her. "Metabolic rates are double and rising, Doctor."

Hanoch-Spock spoke. "A delicious woman… a delicious sight to awaken to after half a million years."

Disconcerted, Christine said, "Thank you."

But Hanoch-Spock was looking beyond her now to where Thalassa-Anne was sitting up in bed, raven hair about her shoulders, the blue eyes shining as she savored the forgotten feeling of life. "I—I didn't remember what it felt like… to breathe—to breathe like this!" She turned. "Sargon? Where's Sargon?"

Sargon-Kirk rose and went to her. "Here… in this body, Thalassa." With a becoming dignity, threaded with joy in the awakening of long-forgotten senses, she smiled at him, "The body does not displease me, my husband. It is not unlike that which was your own."

"I am pleased by your pleasure, my love."

She had become aware of her hands. Tentatively, she reached one up to caress his cheek. "After so long," she whispered. "It's been so long, Sargon."

His arms were around her. Christine averted her eyes as their lips met. There was something infinitely touching in this embrace, longed for but deferred for half a million years. They separated and Christine said, "I'm sorry… I'm here…"

Thalassa-Anne extended a gentle hand. "You are not intruding, my child. As a woman, you know my wondrous gratitude at touching him who is mine again. Do you have a man?"

"No. I—I…" Despite herself, Christine found her eyes moving to Spock, forgetting for the moment that it was Hanoch who inhabited him. She flushed. "No, I… do not have that need. I have my work." She took a hasty reading of the body-function panel. Had Hanoch-Spock noticed that look?

Thalassa-Anne spoke quietly to Sargon. "How cruel. May I help her, my husband?"

"It would be so easy to give all of them happiness, Thalassa." He shook his head gently. "But we must not interfere in their lives."

More aggressive than the others, Hanoch-Spock was already circling the room, examining its equipment. He turned to find McCoy watching him. "An excellent body, Doctor. It seems I received the best of the three." He extended his arms, flexing Spock's superb biceps. "Strength, hearing, eyesight, all above the human norm. I'm surprised the Vulcans never conquered your race."

"Vulcans prize peace above all, Hanoch."

"Of course. Of course. Just as do we."

But McCoy had seen Thalassa-Anne sink back on her pillow. "Nurse!"

The lovely alien whispered, "A wave of heat suddenly… I feel…"

Christine caught her as she sagged, drawing in the support of another pillow behind her. McCoy was assisting her when he saw Sargon-Kirk begin to slump. As he supported him to his bed, he said, "Hanoch, you'd better go back to bed, too."

But Spock's metabolism had not yet been affected. Hanoch said, "Unnecessary at present, Doctor. My Vulcan body is accustomed to higher metabolism."

Christine tore her eyes from him to check Thalassa-Anne's body-function panel. Its readings were alarmingly high. McCoy rushed to the bed at the nurse's call. Then he whirled to the bed that held Sargon-Kirk. "It won't work, Sargon! You've got to get out of them before you kill them!"

The answer came weakly. "We will… vacate them… until you can administer… a metabolic-reduction injection."

"A what?" McCoy demanded.

Hanoch-Spock joined him at the bed, looking down at Kirk's sweaty forehead. "I will prepare the formula, Sargon," he said.

"Hanoch… your own condition…"

"I can maintain this body for several more hours, Sargon, Do not be anxious."

"Then… Thalassa and I… will now return to our confinement."

Beside the beds of Kirk and Anne the globes flared with light again. But Hanoch-Spock, still incarnate, gave his dim one a look of repulsion. He turned from Kirk's bed to speak to McCoy. "I shall need help to prepare the formula. Your nurse will assist me, Doctor, in your pharmacology laboratory."

Christine looked at McCoy. He couldn't tell himself that he was confronted by a command decision. That had already been made by Kirk. The decision facing him merely implemented his Captain's wish. He nodded reluctantly—and Christine followed Hanoch-Spock out of Sickbay.

Behind him Kirk and Anne were slowly recovering from the effects of the alien possession. Kirk's eyes at last fluttered open. McCoy had to stoop to hear his whisper. "Bones…"

"It was close, Jim. You and Anne barely got back in time. Unless this formula works, we can't risk another transfer."

In the pharmacology laboratory, two hypos lay on a table. Hanoch-Spock held the third one. He made some adjustment on it, Christine behind him, watching. At last, he spoke. "This formula will reduce heart action and body function to normal. Whenever their bodies are occupied, administer one injection, ten cc's every hour."

"I understand," Christine said.

"Code this one for Thalassa. And *this* hypo, code it for me."

"Yes, sir." She affixed the appropriate seals to the hypos.

"Each contains a formula suited to the physical traits of that individual's body."

She pointed to the third hypo. "And that one is for Captain Kirk when Sargon is in his body?

Hanoch-Kirk handed it to her. "Yes. Of course."

Christine had taken the hypo to mark it when she noticed the color of its fluid. She examined it more carefully. Then, troubled, she said, "This hypo doesn't contain the same formula."

Hanoch-Spock smiled. On Spock's usually expressionless face, the smile was extraordinarily charming. "Since I will arrange for you to give the injections, no one else will notice that."

"But—without the correct formula, Captain Kirk will die."

"So he will—and Sargon with him."

Christine, staring, had begun to protest when Hanoch-Spock, reaching out, touched her forehead. Her head swam with dizziness. Then all sensation left her. Entranced where she stood, she could only look at him helplessly.

"Thalassa I can use," he said. "But Sargon must be destroyed. He would oppose me in what I plan. You wish to speak, my dear?"

"Please, I… I was… I wanted to say something." She passed a hand over her whirling head. "I've… forgotten what it was."

He touched her brow again. "You were about to say you watched me prepare the formula and fill the three hypos with it."

She swayed. "Yes—that was it. I will tell Dr McCoy that each hypo is properly filled for each patient. You must excuse me. I lost my train of thought for a moment."

"It will not occur again," he said. "You are under my guidance now, child." Looking quickly toward the corridor, he made for the doorway. "And now for Dr McCoy…"

But McCoy had snapped the lab door open. "If you require any further drugs or assistance, Hanoch—"

"I've encountered no difficulties at all, Doctor. I left the formula on your computer if you care to examine it."

In her trance Christine picked up the hypos. She spoke the words implanted in her mind. "I watched them prepared and coded, Doctor. Shall I take them to Sickbay?"

McCoy nodded. As the door closed behind her, Hanoch-Spock smiled. "It's good to be alive again, Doctor. I will find it most difficult when the time comes to surrender this body I so enjoy.

Was it the implication of the last words that disturbed McCoy? Or was it the shock of the excessively charming smile on Spock's

face? He didn't know. All he knew was the sense of trouble that oppressed him as he watched the alien stride from the lab with Spock's legs.

Nor did his feeling of foreboding diminish as construction of the robots progressed. He found himself spending more and more time in Sickbay—his sole haven of retreat from the nameless anxieties that beset him. Christine, too, seemed unlike herself—constrained, diffident. It irritated him.

As she approached him now, he didn't look up when she said, "You asked to see me, Doctor, before the next injections."

"Yes. You're staying alert for any side effects, any unusual symptoms?"

"The shots work perfectly, sir. There are no problems at all."

He struck his desk. "The devil there aren't!" He crossed to the three receptacles. "That flicker of energy there is Jim Kirk! And Spock there! Anne Mulhall! Suppose the bodies these aliens are using are *not* returned to them?"

"If I'm to give the injections on time, Doctor, I should leave now."

"Well, walk, then! Don't just stand there, talking! Do it!"

"Yes, sir."

Alone, McCoy stalked over to the Sargon-Kirk globe. "You and your blasted rent-a-body agreement, Kirk!" He moved to Spock's receptacle. "The only halfway pleasant thing about this is you, Spock! Must be humiliating for a logical superior Vulcan not to have a larger flicker than that!"

One of McCoy's persisting, if minor, anxieties was the chaos that had descended upon his immaculate laboratory. Workbenches now crowded it; and his marble slabs were littered with the elements and other paraphernalia that would ultimately be assembled into the android robots. Hanoch-Spock over at his bench was manipulating a complex tool under difficult circumstances, for across the lab Sargon-Kirk and Thalassa-Anne were sharing a chore together. The intimacy between them angered and distracted him. He saw them both reach for a component at the same time. They smiled at each other, their hands clasping, their eyes meeting. She touched his hair.

"Sargon, I remember a day long ago. We sat beside a silver lake. The air was scented with the flowers of our planet and…"

He nodded. "I remember, Thalassa. We held hands like this." He hesitated, removing his from hers. "And I think it best not to remember too well."

"In two days you'll have hands of your own again, Thalassa," Hanoch-Spock said. "Mechanically efficient, quite human-looking—android robot hands. Hands without feeling, of course. So enjoy the taste of life while you can."

"But our minds will have survived. And as androids, Hanoch, we…" Sargon-Kirk suddenly looked very tired.

"What is it, Sargon?" Thalassa-Anne asked anxiously.

"Our next injection… will renovate me. Do not be concerned." He addressed Hanoch. "As androids we can move among those who *do* live, teaching them, helping them to avoid the errors we made."

"Yes, moving as machines minus the ability to feel love, joy, sorrow."

Sargon-Kirk spoke sternly. "We pledged ourselves that survival would be sufficient, Hanoch. Now that we've taken human bodies not our own, the ancient evil temptations would plague us again, haunt us with the dream of a godlike master-race."

"It is only that I feel sorrow for your wife, Sargon." He spoke to Thalassa-Anne. "You were younger than we when the end came. You had enjoyed so little of living."

She said, "We made a pledge, Hanoch." But her face was troubled. The sympathy had weakened her; and she, too, looked suddenly exhausted. She was leaning back against the wall as Christine entered with the hypos. She extended her arm for the injection. "Nurse," she said, "Sargon does not appear well."

"I've checked his metabolic rate every few hours, Thalassa. It hasn't varied from normal." And moving on, Christine administered the other injections. As the hypo hissed against his arm, Hanoch-Spock said, "I was fatigued, also. I feel much better now."

But though color had returned to Thalassa-Anne's face, concern for her husband had not been allayed. He smiled at her. "Do not worry. I shall have recovered in a moment." But he showed none of the rejuvenating effects seen in the others. He had to make an effort to resume his work.

McCoy noted it as he entered the lab. He looked at Christine. "Nurse," he said, "I want to see you in Sickbay. Bring those hypos."

In his office he selected the hypo coded for Sargon-Kirk, examining it. Christine watched him, troubled as though trying to

remember something she had forgotten. After a long moment, he handed it back to her. She took it, still puzzling over it, and finally passed over a tape cartridge to him.

"Something wrong, Miss Chapel?"

"Yes… I…" She paused, trying to find words. "I—had something to say. But I can't seem to remember."

"Regarding our patients?"

"Yes, that must be it. I—am so pleased by the way they are responding, sir." She gestured to the hypo on his desk. "The formula is working perfectly."

"You look tired," McCoy said. "If you'd like me to handle the next few injections…"

Abruptly her face lit with a smile. "Tired? Not at all, Doctor. But thank you for asking."

She turned to replace the hypos in a cabinet. McCoy eyed her for a moment. Then, deciding he had been concerned over nothing, he returned to the reports on his desk.

The aliens worked swiftly and skillfully. Within the following hours, the robot bodies were partially assembled. Thalassa-Anne was alone in the lab when Scott entered to deliver some supplies. He paused to watch her deft hands moving over a torso.

"Thank you," she said. "Have you prepared the negaton hydrocoils per the drawings Sargon gave you?"

Scott nodded. "For all the good they'll do you. Fancy name—but how will something that looks like a drop of jelly make that thing move its limbs? You'll need microgears, some form of pulley that does what a muscle does."

She smiled her charming smile. "That would be highly inefficient, Mr Scott."

"I tell you, lady, this thing won't work." As he spoke, Hanoch-Spock had come in. Now he sauntered over to them. "It will have twice the strength and agility of your body, Engineer, and it will last a thousand years. That is, it will if you'll permit us to complete these robot envelopes of ours."

Scott strode to the lab door, his back stiff with irritation. Hanoch-Spock crossed over to Thalassa-Anne, his eyes intent on her raven hair. "Actually, a thousand-year prison, Thalassa." He leaned toward her. "And when it wears out, we'll build a new one.

We'll lock ourselves into it for another thousand years, then another and another…"

Disturbed, she looked up from her work. He went on. "Sargon has closed his mind to a better way with these bodies we wear."

"They are not ours, Hanoch."

"Three bodies. Is that such a price for mankind to pay for all we offer? Thalassa." He seized her hand. "The humans who own these bodies would surrender them gladly to accomplish a fraction of what we'll do. Are we entitled to no reward for our labors—no joy?"

She snatched her hand away; and pointing to the robot torso on the bench, he said, "Do you prefer incarceration in that?"

She leaped to her feet, her tools flying. *"No! I'm beginning to hate the thing!"*

In a corridor, not far away, Sargon-Kirk, collapsing, had crumpled to the deck.

Lifeless, inert, Kirk's body lay on a medical table in Sickbay where Nurse M'Benga and a medical technician were hurriedly but expertly fitting the cryosurgical and blood-filtrating units over it. A tense McCoy watched.

His mind was a tumult of confusion. Too distant from his receptacle to transfer back into it, Sargon had died when Kirk's body died. So that left the big question. Kirk's consciousness still survived, despite the death of his body. It still glimmered, faint but alive, in Sargon's globe. Then could Kirk be called dead? McCoy wiped the sweat from his face—and ordered in another resuscitating instrument.

Meanwhile, in his once-shining lab, Hanoch-Spock was operating a different instrument. He passed the small device over the nearly completed android robot that lay on a slab. It looked sexless. It still lacked hair, eyebrows, the indentations which give expression to a human face. Thalassa-Anne watched him wearily, lost in her anguished grief. Christine, blank-eyed as ever, stood beside the slab.

"Hanoch, why do you pretend to work on that thing? You killed Sargon. You murdered my husband. You murdered him because you do not intend to give up your body. You've always intended to keep it."

A sudden rage possessed Thalassa. Sargon had labored so hard to restore them to joy, to life in the body. He had kissed this body

she wore! In a short while, it would all be for nothing. This body he had embraced would have to be vacated, returned to its owner. She rushed from the lab on the surge of her fury to fling open the door of Sickbay.

McCoy looked up, startled. "Doctor," she said, "would you like to save your Captain Kirk?"

"Not half an hour ago you said that was impossible. When we found him, you said—"

"Dismiss these people!" she commanded.

McCoy stared at her. "We have many powers Sargon did not permit us to use! If you care for your Captain, dismiss these people!"

McCoy waved the nurse and technician out of Sickbay.

"Well?" he said.

"This body I wear is sacred to me. My husband embraced it. I intend to keep it!"

So it was out at last. "I see," McCoy said. "And Hanoch? He intends, of course, to keep Spock's body."

"Hanoch's plans are his own affair. I wish only to keep the body my husband kissed!"

"Are you asking for my approval?"

"I require only your silence. Only you and I will know that Anne Mulhall has not returned to her body. Isn't your silence worth your Captain's life?" At the look on McCoy's face, the fury burned in her again. "Doctor, we can take what we wish. Neither you, this ship, nor all your little worlds have the power to stop us!"

McCoy looked down at Kirk's lifeless body. Jim Kirk—alive again, his easy vitality, his courage, his affectionate "Bones". *This was a command decision:* a choice between loyalty to the dearest friend of his life—and loyalty to himself. And he knew what the dearest friend would want.

"I cannot trade a body I do not own," he said. "Neither would my Captain. Your body belongs to a young woman who—"

"Whom you hardly know, almost a stranger to you."

McCoy shouted. "*I do not peddle human flesh! I am a physician!*"

The blue eyes flashed lightning. "*A physician?* In contrast to what we are, you are a prancing, savage medicine man—a primitive savage! You dare to defy one you should be on your knees to in worship!" She made a gesture of acid contempt. "*I can destroy you with a single thought!*"

A ring of flame shot up around McCoy. He flung his hands before his face to shield it from the rising fire.

As he did so, Thalassa gave a wild cry. She fell to her knees, crying, *"No! Stop!* Forgive me, forgive me…"

The flames died as suddenly as they had come. Even the smell of their smoke was gone; and where searing fire had encircled McCoy only a moment before, not a mark of its presence remained.

She was still on her knees, weeping. "Sargon was… right," she sobbed. "The temptations are… too great. But understand. In the name of whatever gods you worship, understand! The emotions of life are dear—its needs, its hopes. But… our power is too great. We would begin to destroy… as I almost destroyed you then. Forgive me… forgive…"

"I am pleased, beloved. It is good you have found the truth for yourself."

Her head lifted. *"Sargon!* Oh, my husband, where are you? Hanoch has killed you!"

"I have power, my wife, that Hanoch does not suspect."

"Yes. Yes. I understand." The words came slowly. She rose to her feet, staring at McCoy. "My Sargon has placed his consciousness within this ship of yours."

Christine Chapel opened the door of Sickbay. She was crossing to the hypo cabinet when McCoy galvanized. "You! Get out of my sight!"

Thalassa shook her head. "No, Doctor. She is necessary to us."

"Necessary? She is under Hanoch's control!"

"My Sargon has a plan, Doctor. Leave us. We have much work to do."

After a moment, McCoy obeyed. But as the door closed behind him, he heard a dull crunching explosion come from inside. The ship shuddered slightly. The sound came again.

"Thalassa!" he shouted. *"What's going* on?"

When the sound came for the third time, he raced for the corridor intercom. This is Sickbay. Get me—"

Behind him Sickbay's door opened. Empty-eyed, Christine emerged to move on past him down the corridor. He rushed inside —and came to a dead halt. Kirk was standing there, smiting at him.

"I'm fine, Bones," he said. He reached out a hand to draw Anne Mulhall up beside him. "We're both fine, Bones."

"Thalassa…"

Anne spoke quietly. "She is with Sargon, Doctor."

"With Sargon?" He looked past them to the three globes. They were broken, melted, black, dead.

"*Jim!* Spock's consciousness was in one of those!"

"It was necessary," Kirk said.

McCoy flung his arms up. "What do you mean, man? There's no Spock to return to his body now! You've killed your best friend, a loyal officer of the Service!"

"Prepare a hypo, Bones. The fastest and deadliest poison to Vulcans. Spock's consciousness is gone, but we must now kill his body, too. His body—and the thing inside it."

On the bridge, Uhura screamed. Then she slumped against her board, trembling. Nonchalant, Hanoch-Spock left her to go to Kirk's command chair. The bewitched Christine waited at his side. He spoke to Sulu. "Shall I make an example of you, too, Helm? Take us out of orbit! A course for Earth!"

Sulu hit his controls. Then he wheeled in his chair. "Look for yourself! The ship won't respond! Nothing works!"

The elevator doors slid open. Kirk and Anne stepped out. Behind them came McCoy, his hypo carefully hidden. The alien in the command chair didn't trouble himself to turn; but just before they reached it, it said, Pain, Kirk. Exquisite pain. As for you, lovely one of the blue eyes…"

Kirk had dropped as though shot, gasping, his throat hungering to scream. Hanoch-Spock pointed a finger at Anne. She froze, shudders shaking her—and Sulu, pressed beyond control, leaped from his seat only to fall, moaning with pain. As Anne crumpled to the deck, McCoy dove for the command chair; but Hanoch, holding up a palm, halted him a foot away from Spock's body.

"I know every thought in every mind around me," he said. Chapel, remove the hypo from the Doctor."

Christine, reaching into an inside pocket of McCoy's white jacket, obeyed. Hanoch said, "Good. Inject him with his own dose—an example to all those who defy me."

She lifted the hypo toward McCoy—and without the slightest change of expression, wheeled to drive it, hissing, into Hanoch's arm. He stood up. "Fools!" he shrieked. "I'll simply transfer to… another space, another body!" Suddenly, he reeled. "*It's you,*

Sargon!" He whimpered, "Please… please, Sargon, let me transfer to—"

Then he crashed to the floor. Kirk rushed to the fallen body. Kneeling beside it, he lifted its head to cradle it in his arms. "Spock . . . Spock, my friend, my comrade… if only there had been some other way." He choked on unshed tears.

The head stirred in his arms. Its eyes opened; and the bridge reverberated again to the rich, deep voice. "*How could I allow the sacrifice of one so close to you, my son?*"

"There was enough poison in that hypo," McCoy cried, "to kill ten Vulcans!"

"*I allowed you to believe that, Doctor. Else, Hanoch could not have read your thought—and believed it, too. He has fled Spock's body. He is destroyed.*"

Kirk found words. "The receptacles are broken, Spock. Where was your consciousness kept?"

Spock was on his feet. "In the last place Hanoch would suspect, Captain." He gestured toward Christine.

She nodded, smiling. "That's why Thalassa called me 'necessary,' Doctor. Mr Spock's consciousness was installed in me. We have been sharing it together."

"*We know now we cannot permit ourselves to exist in your world, my children. Thalassa and I must depart into oblivion.*"

Kirk looked up. "Sargon, isn't there any way we can help you?"

"*Yes, my son. Let Thalassa and me enter your bodies again for our last moment together.*"

Though there was no transfer flare, Kirk and Anne both felt its heat as Sargon and Thalassa moved into them. Anne, in Kirk's arms, said, "Oblivion together does not frighten me, my husband." She kissed Kirk's forehead, her hand caressing his cheek. "Promise me we will be together."

Kirk bent his head to her mouth, holding her close. Anne was shaking under the storm of Thalassa's grief. "Together forever, my Sargon… forever…"

"I promise, my love. I promise…"

For their last moment, they clung together on the edge of Nothing. Then they were gone, the dwindling heat of their passing, leaving Anne's eyes filled with Thalassa's tears. Still clasped in Kirk's arms, they stared at each other. Then, flushing at the public embrace, Kirk released her. He cleared his throat.

"Dr Mulhall… er… thank you. I… thank you in… Sargon's name… for your cooperation."

The sapphire eyes smiled through their tears. "Captain, I—I was happy to… cooperate."

Christine, sobbing, turned to Spock. "I felt the same way, Mr Spock… when we shared our consciousness together."

Spock's left eyebrow lifted. "Nurse Chapel," he began, and subsided into silence.

McCoy grinned at him. "This sharing of consciousness—it sounds somewhat immoral to me, my Vulcan friend."

"I assure you it was a most distressing experience," Spock said earnestly. "You would not believe the torrents of emotion I encountered—the jungle of illogic." He almost shuddered.

Christine smiled at him. "Why, thank you, Mr Spock."

"I don't understand, nurse. Thank me?"

"You just paid her a high compliment, Spock," Kirk said.

"Yes, you do turn a nice phrase now and then," McCoy said. He turned to Christine. "Thank the stars," he said, "that my sex doesn't understand the other one."

Anne laughed. "Come along with me, my fellow woman. If they don't understand us after all this time, no elucidation by us can enlighten them."

Kirk, smiling too, went to his command chair. Spock was standing beside it, still puzzled. "Captain, I really *don't* understand."

"Sargon did, Spock. 'Together forever.' Someone may someday teach you what that means. Who knows? When that next Vulcan seven-year cycle rolls around again…"

Spock gravely considered the idea. "Sargon *was* enormously advanced, Captain. I shall ponder this."

As he returned to his station, Kirk's eyes followed him with affection. "Ah, well," he said, "for now that's how it is." He turned to Sulu. "All right, Mr Sulu, take us out of orbit."

"Leaving orbit, sir."

PATTERNS OF FORCE

(John Meredyth Lucas)

Officially, the mission was location of a missing cultural observer assigned to Ekos, sister planet of Zeon in a double system. But both Kirk and Spock had personal interest invested in the whereabouts of John Gill. The missing man had been Kirk's instructor at the Space Academy. As to Spock, he'd studied his Earth history from a John Gill text. Now, as the *Enterprise* entered into orbit around Ekos, the inner planet, the two men looked at the distinguished face projected onto the bridge screen.

Kirk remembered it well. "Lieutenant Uhura, try to raise John Gill on Starfleet communication channels."

"Aye, sir."

"Jim, Starfleet's been trying for six months," McCoy said. "If he's still alive, isn't it unlikely he'd receive us now?"

"I don't know, Doctor. We're here to find out what's happened *because* I don't know."

"No response on any Starfleet channel, Captain," Uhura reported.

Spock, his eyes still on the screen, said, "What impressed me most was Gill's treatment of history as causes and motivations rather than dates and events. His text was—"

Chekov interrupted. "Spacecraft approaching from the inner planet, Captain."

"From Ekos?"

The question sent Spock back to his station. Checking his own viewer, he said, "Yes, Captain. But it must be a Zeon ship. The Zeons have a crude interplanetary capability." He leaned closer to his viewer. "Reaction powered. A small rocket. And it's on an intercept course." He lifted his head to look at Kirk. "That means sophisticated detection equipment that neither Zeon nor Ekos should have."

Kirk, nodding, swung his chair to Uhura. "Try ship-to-ship frequencies, Lieutenant."

Spock spoke again. "No indication of life aboard, Captain. It's an unmanned probe which seems to be carrying a warhead."

Kirk spoke, "Standby phasers, Mr Chekov."

"Phasers ready, sir."

"Range, Mr Chekov?"

"Two hundred kilometers, sir. Closing fast."

"Fire," Kirk said.

John Gill's face vanished from the screen. In its stead, a blue-white flare of light flashed. The bridge trembled under shock waves.

"A thermonuclear warhead," Spock said.

McCoy stared at him. "But that's generations away from where these people should be technologically! How could they have managed nuclear physics?"

Kirk, recalling the brilliant eyes of John Gill, said, "Maybe they had help."

It was unthinkable. But a Starship Captain had to oblige himself to think the unthinkable. The ugly fact remained that John Gill's Ekos had launched attack on the *Enterprise*. "Mr Chekov, plot us a maximum orbit. Let's get out of their detection equipment's range."

"Orbit computed and locked in, sir."

"Execute."

As the impulse engines came on, Scott emerged from the elevator and Uhura said, "Still no response from John Gill on any channel, sir."

"He must be dead," McCoy said. "And what's going on down there on Ekos?"

Spock looked up. "According to our records, the Ekosians are warlike, primitive, in a state of anarchy. Zeon, the other planet, has a relatively high technology, and its people are peaceful."

Kirk got up to go to the computer station. "You're saying that the people with the war potential aren't warlike, Mr Spock. So who threw that missile at us?"

"Our computer data appear to be considerably out of date, Captain. Obviously, things have been happening very rapidly on Ekos."

Kirk took a brief pace of the bridge. "Mr Spock, we've run into something more disturbing than John Gill's disappearance. You and I will beam down to Ekos."

Scott said, “After what they just threw at us, I suggest a landing party in force, sir.”

“No. We’ll observe the noninterference directive, Scotty.”

“Jim,” McCoy said, “I think he’s got a good—”

“All right. We’ll take one precaution. Bones, prepare subcutaneous transponders in the event we’re unable to use our communicators.”

“Captain, may I suggest the ship’s uniform section prepare clothing suitable to the culture?”

“You may indeed, Mr Spock.”

McCoy performed the simple operation in the Transporter Room. His patients had changed into nondescript denim work clothes, Spock wearing a stocking cap to hide his ears. Rolling up a sleeve, Kirk said, “All right, Doctor, insert the transponders.” McCoy used a hypo to inject the tiny devices into their left wrists. They rolled down their sleeves to cover the small bumps. Then Kirk spoke to Scott.

“Make one low pass to communication range in three hours, Scotty. If we fail to make contact at the appointed time, take our coordinates from the transponders and beam us aboard, whatever our condition might be.”

Scott was glum. “Aye, Captain. Whatever your condition.”

The two stepped onto the platform.

“Energize,” Kirk said.

Scott moved dials. The Transporter shimmer sparkled.

“Good luck!” McCoy shouted.

But they were gone.

The time on Ekos was day, and the place they arrived in was a street—a street appropriate to an Earth of the Twentieth Century. Looking around him, Spock said, “The Ekosians are humanoid, so there is apt to be a certain similarity in structure. It is interesting how body form tends to shape the structure of—”

“Mr Spock, we’re not here to do an architectural study. We are __”

Kirk broke off at sudden shouts and the sound of running feet. A young man, clearly spent and terrified, raced around the corner to their left, all his strength centered on his effort to elude his pursuers. He was almost on top of the *Enterprise* men before he saw them. “Hide!” he panted. “They are right behind me! Quickly! Get away…”

He sank to his knees, his lungs heaving. The shouting behind him grew louder. Spock pulled Kirk into the shadow of a doorway as three armed men rounded the corner. They wore the brown shirts of Nazi Storm Troopers, their left arms encircled by black bands marked with red circles. In the center of each circle was a black swastika.

"There's the Zeon pig!"

They surrounded the kneeling man. "On your feet, pig!" One of the troopers kicked the man. It was a good game. The others joined in it.

Kirk's hand had instinctively reached for his phaser. Spock checked him. "The noninterference directive, Captain."

"Hands over your head, Zeon. Higher!"

The man's mouth was bleeding. Gratified by sight of the blood, the biggest trooper yelled, "Keep those hands in the air! Don't touch anything Ekosian! You swine have defiled us enough! Move!" He planted a heavy foot in the man's back and sent him sprawling. Then his victim was jerked to his feet to be marched away.

The horrified Kirk spoke to Spock. "It's a nightmare. Did you recognize those uniforms? That armband?"

"Mid-Twentieth Century Earth. A nation state called Nazi Germany, Captain."

"Attention! Attention! Attention!"

The newscaster's voice came from a loudspeaker set on a post a few yards away. As its square TV screen lighted up, the voice said, "An announcer from Führer Headquarters…"

A brown-shirted announcer, a flag bearing the Nazi emblem behind him, appeared on the screen. "Today," he said, "the Führer has ordered our glorious capital made Zeon free. Starting at dawn, our heroic troops began flushing out the Zeon monsters who have been poisoning our planet…"

His face was replaced by the spectacle of burly SS men rounding up a group of pitifully frightened old men, women and children. One of the children was crying.

Watching, Kirk said, "How could this have happened? The chance of another planet developing a Nazi culture, using the forms, symbols, the uniforms of Twentieth Century Earth, is so fantastically slim that—"

Spock interrupted. "Virtually impossible, Captain. Yet the evidence is quite clear."

The screen was now showing shots of a panzer column and troops goose-stepping under the roar of Stuka dive bombers. The uniformed announcer's voice was saying, "The Führer's Headquarters reports repulsing an attack by Zeon spacecraft. Our missiles utterly destroyed the enemy."

Kirk turned to Spock. "The 'enemy' would have been the *Enterprise*. You look well, Mr Spock, for having been utterly destroyed." He looked back at the screen. It now held the image of a vast amphitheater, massed with thousands upon thousands of cheering troops. Over the noise, the announcer said, "At this patriotic demonstration, Deputy Führer Melakon presented the iron cross, second class, to Daras, Hero of the Fatherland."

The scene changed to a close-up of a cold-faced, middle-aged man in uniform, flanked by Gestapo guards. A girl mounted the podium, wearing her uniform with grace and style. Under its cap her blonde hair gleamed with a light of its own. Her beautiful face was grave with pride as Melakon pinned the decoration to the breast of her uniform.

The announcer was back. He came to rigid attention as he spoke. "Everywhere, preparations go forward for the final decision. Death to Zeon! Long live the Fatherland!"

The TV camera left his face to focus on a huge poster on the wall behind him. Framed in black and red, its four corners were decorated with swastikas. It held a portrait.

"Long live the Führer!" the announcer shouted, and, turning, gave the portrait a stiff-armed salute.

The face in the portrait was that of John Gill.

Older—but unmistakable.

Kirk was stunned. "That's John Gill! The Führer!"

"Fascinating!" Spock exclaimed.

"You there!"

They wheeled. They were facing an SS Lieutenant. The trooper's Luger was leveled at Kirk's stomach. "Zeons!" he cried. Then his eyes narrowed as he took another look at Spock. He whipped off the stocking cap with a yell of triumph. "What are those, ears? What kind of monsters are the Zeons sending against us?"

Kirk caught Spock's eye. He signaled, and, stepping away from him, induced the SS man to turn slightly. "You're right, Lieutenant," he said. "He is not one of us."

"What do you mean 'us'?"

"Lieutenant, look out!"

Spock timed his warning to a sideways leap. The officer's eyes followed him, centering on him just long enough for Kirk to move. He chopped him. The Lieutenant dropped.

Kirk nodded to Spock. As they stripped the man of his uniform, Kirk said, "His helmet will conceal your 'monster' ears, Mr Spock."

"You propose that we pass ourselves off as Nazis, sir?"

"If John Gill is the leader, this would seem the 'logical' way to approach him."

Shouldering into the uniform coat, Spock said, "A point well taken, Captain." Kirk eyed him in his full SS uniform. "Somewhat gaudy, Mr Spock. But I think it's an improvement."

Spock threw him a look of disgust. Cautiously, they edged out into the street. But their care didn't pay off. This time it was a Gestapo Lieutenant who accosted them. He had grabbed Kirk's shoulder, but as he recognized Spock's uniform, he let it go.

"A Zeon?"

Spock nodded. "I captured him. Is that not the proper procedure with enemies of the Fatherland?"

"With all Zeon pigs, Lieutenant."

"Take charge of him," Spock said.

"With pleasure." He seized Kirk again. "All right, Zeon, today we have a surprise for you. We—"

He collapsed under the Vulcan neck pinch. Kirk looked down at the unconscious body. "I'm sorry, Spock, that your uniform isn't as attractive as mine is. I believe this is the Gestapo variety."

"Correct, Captain. You should make a very convincing Nazi."

Kirk snapped him a look. But he was too busy turning himself into a Gestapo officer to think of a suitable rejoinder.

They gave themselves time before mounting the steps of the Chancellery. Swastikas were everywhere—on the banners that fluttered over the building, on the arm-bands of the SS men who stood at its massive doors, armed with submachine guns. The guards snapped to attention as an SS General Officer crossed the pavement to the steps. Kirk and Spock played it cool as they followed behind him. An SS Major came out of the big doors as the General entered them.

The Major glared at Spock. "Lieutenant! Have you forgotten how to salute?"

Spock extended his arm in a crisp Nazi salute.

"Papers," the Major said.

Kirk turned to Spock. "Your orders, Lieutenant. The Major wants to see your orders. There, in your jacket…"

The Major studied them suspiciously as Spock reached quickly into his jacket. He came out with a wallet, and the Major took it.

Kirk moved into the obvious breach of confidence. "The Lieutenant is a little dazed, sir. He captured several Zeons single-handed. But one of the pigs struck him before he dropped. I promise you, that pig will never get up again."

"Good work, Lieutenant. Hail the Führer!"

He handed the wallet back to Spock. Kirk quickly extended his arm in the Nazi salute. "Hail the Führer!"

Spock repeated the litany. "Hail the Führer!"

"This is a day to remember, Major," Kirk said.

As they passed into the Chancellery, the Major stopped Spock, solicitude in his face. "Better have a doctor check you, Lieutenant. You don't look well. Your colour is—Remove your helmet."

"We have no time to waste," Spock said.

Kirk's heart was pounding. "Major, we have urgent business with the Führer. We must see him immediately."

The Major was inexorable. "Your helmet, Lieutenant. Take it off!"

The guards' submachine guns jabbed brutally into Spock's neck. He lifted the helmet, revealing his pointed Vulcan ears.

In the cell, they had stripped Kirk to the waist. For a purpose. They did nothing without a purpose. The naked, uncovered flesh made the whip's lashing immediate. Like Spock, manacled too, he made no sound as the whip cut bloody grooves into his back. Behind them in the cell, the Zeon they had first seen brutalized lay, retching, on his stomach.

"You wish to talk now?"

The SS Major was pleased to be irritated. "Tell me your orders! You were sent to kill our Führer. Confess! Do you want some more persuasion?"

Kirk rallied the power of speech. "You're making this a rather one-sided conversation, Major."

"Don't joke with me, Zeon pig!" The Major glanced at his SS lasher. He took a lowered, confidential tone. "Who is this pointed-

eared alien? Things will go easier with you if you tell me about him."

Kirk lifted his pain-filled eyes. "Let us talk to the Führer. We'll tell him anything he wants to know."

"You'll be glad to talk to me before I've finished with you, you Zeon swine, you—"

The cell door opened. A man, simply uniformed in Party dress but radiating an air of quiet, self-intact authority, walked in. The SS Major stiffened to awed attention. "Chairman Eneg! I am honored! Excellency, I have been interrogating these two spies, captured in the very act of—"

"I have had the full report."

The quiet man ignored the Major to speak to Spock. "You are not from Zeon. Where do you come from?"

Kirk said, "We'll explain when we see the Führer."

"And what is your business with the Führer?"

"We can discuss that only with him."

Furious, the Major seized the whip from the guard and slashed Kirk with it. "Pig! You're speaking to the Chairman of the Party!"

"That's enough, Major!" Eneg said sharply. He turned to Kirk. "What are the weapons that were found on you? What design?"

Kirk was silent. Eneg looked at the Major. "Our famously efficient SS laboratories have failed to discover how your weapons work."

The Major reddened. "Excellency, give me a few minutes with them, and I promise you I'll have them—"

"You've had more than a few minutes with them without result." Eneg looked at Kirk's slashed back. "The trouble with you SS people is that you don't realize punishment is ineffective after a certain point. Men become insensitive."

After a moment, the Major said, "Yes, Excellency."

"Lock them up. Let their pain argue with them. Then I will question them."

"Excellency, the standing order is: 'Interrogate and execute.' The interrogation is finished. Therefore—"

"Finished, Major? What have you learned? Nothing. Hold them for an hour."

"Excellency, the order—"

Eneg's quiet eyes flashed with sudden anger. "That is my order, Major. I suggest that you do not disobey it."

"Yes, Excellency."

Eneg turned to the door. The guard leaped to open it for him. As he left, the Major turned back to the *Enterprise* men. "All right, pigs. My eye will be on the clock. When the hour is up, you will die. Most unpleasantly, I promise you." He slammed the cell door behind him.

Slowly, the Zeon prisoner got to his feet, his eyes watchful as Spock said, "What do you propose to do, Captain?"

"I don't know. But we haven't much time to do it. Without our phasers… our communicators…" He looked around the cell. "John Gill is the only chance we have now."

"Captain, have you considered how he must have changed to be responsible for all this?"

"Professor Gill was one of the kindest, gentlest men I've ever known. For him to be a Nazi is so—it's just impossible."

The Zeon spoke. "Why did they take you? You are not a Zeon." He nodded toward Spock. "And he certainly is not. Who are you?"

Spock said, "Why do the Nazis hate Zeons?"

The question evoked a bitter answer. "Without us to hate, there would be nothing to bring them together. So the Party has built us into a threat—a disease that must be wiped out."

"Is Zeon a threat to them?"

"Where *did* you come from? Our warlike period ended a dozen generations ago! When we came here, we thought we were civilizing the Ekosians!"

"Were they like this when you Zeons first came?" Kirk said.

"Warlike. But not vicious. That came after the Nazi movement started. Only a few years ago."

Spock looked at Kirk. "That would agree with the time of Gill's arrival, Captain."

The embittered Zeon was launched on the troubles of his people. "When they have destroyed us here, they will attack our planet with the technology we gave them. The danger is that the taking of life is so repugnant to us, we may go down without a struggle." His fists clenched. "After what I've seen in the streets today, I think I could kill!"

Kirk studied the impassioned face. "Do you know the plan of this building?"

The Zeon went on immediate guard. "Why?"

"If we can get to the SS weapons laboratory… get our weapons back, we can stop the slaughter of the Zeons."

"Why should you be interested in saving Zeons?" the man asked coldly.

Kirk turned back to Spock. "We must get our communicators and contact the ship."

"The flaw in that plan. Captain, is these locked cell doors. And beyond them is a guard."

"The transponders!" Kirk cried.

"Pardon, sir?"

But Kirk was staring at the cell's overhead light. "A way to throw some light on our gloom, Mr Spock!"

Spock looked thoughtfully at his wrist. "The rubidium crystals in the transponders! Of course, it would be crude, but perhaps workable. How can we get them out?"

They had lowered their voices. The Zeon hadn't heard their last exchange, but he continued to watch them, puzzled.

"Here," Kirk said.

He yanked the mattress from a bed, and, ripping the fabric, seized a wire spring. It snapped, its edge sharp. He used it to slit through the slight bulge on his wrist, releasing the bright red crystal. Blood welled from the cut. He handed the wire to Spock. As he too probed out his crystal, the Zeon cried, "You will kill yourselves? Bleed to death? But many do it to avoid the torture."

"That's not quite what we had in mind," Kirk told him. "You have the figures computed, Mr Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. It will be necessary to hold the crystals at a specific distance. The distance should be two point seven millimeters. I shall put the first crystal…"

As he spoke, he placed a crystal into a hole at the edge of the flat spring, pushing it firmly in. "? here. The second one at the other end." He was bending the spring into a horseshoe shape so that the crystals at the two ends were precisely aligned. "Two point seven millimeters would be approximately here. That, of course, is a crude estimation."

The Zeon was staring in amazement. "What are you making—some kind of radio?"

"No. The electrical power in that light is very low, Mr Spock."

"It should be sufficient to stimulate the rubidium crystal. As I recall from the history of Physics, the ancient lasers were able to achieve the necessary excitation, even using crude natural crystals. There. It's ready. But to reach the light source, I shall require a platform."

"I'd be honored, Mr Spock." Kirk was wry, only too aware of his lacerated shoulders. He stooped under the bulb and Spock climbed up on them. "I'd appreciate it if you'd hurry, Mr Spock. That guard did a very professional job with the whip."

Spock lifted the cylinder up to the bulb. "The aim, of course, can only be approximate," he said.

Kirk's shoulders were bleeding. "Spock, I'll settle if you can hit the broad side of a barn."

Spock frowned. "Why should I aim at such a structure, sir?"

"Never mind, Spock. Get on with the job."

The tiny rubidium crystals were glowing a bright red. Suddenly, ruby light flashed from Spock's contraption, cutting through the door's steel bars like butter. The lock was next. Kirk saw it loosen.

"All right, Mr Spock. Don't overdo it."

Spock leaped from his shoulders. Kirk touched them, saw blood on his hand and wiped it off on the torn mattress fabric. The Zeon, awed, whispered, "What was that? Zeon science has nothing like it. With such a weapon, we'd have a chance against them!"

"It's not a weapon," Kirk said. "It has an extremely short range. Get over to that corner, Mr Spock. Keep out of sight. I'll create a commotion."

At the cell door, he yelled, "All right. I'll talk. Please! I don't want to die. Guard! I'll talk. Call the Major. I'll talk!"

He shook the bars, still shouting. The guard took a half step forward. Spock jumped from his corner, thrust his hand through the bars and applied the neck pinch. The guard dropped. Spock opened the door, dragged the body into the cell and tossed the man's coat to Kirk. As Kirk struggled into it, the Zeon came out of his daze.

"Take me with you. Please give me a chance to fight them," he pleaded. "Take me—or you'll never find the laboratory."

"An excellent point, Mr Spock. Take him. He's our guide."

But there was another guard in the corridor. Kirk pulled the gun from the downed man's holster, pressed it into the Zeon's back and, motioning Spock to get in front of him, lowered his voice. "Which door is the laboratory?"

"Second on the right," the Zeon whispered.

"All right, Zeon swine, move!" Kirk shouted.

The guard eyed them boredly and resumed his position. As they passed him, heading for the laboratory door, it opened. An SS Trooper emerged and, turning, locked the door behind him. He

was walking by them when Kirk, jerking the Zeon toward him, shoved into the guard. They all fell back against a wall. Kirk slapped the Zeon.

"Clumsy Zeon pig!" He spoke to the guard. "Sorry, but these Zeons do nothing right. They'll pay for it though. They're on their way to the laboratory for experimental work." Nodding, the guard moved off. Grinning, Kirk held his keys.

The laboratory was deserted, but on a table to their left, Kirk spotted their disassembled communicators. He gathered up the parts.

"Who *are* you people?" the Zeon demanded.

"The phasers?" Kirk said.

"I do not see them, Captain."

"Where do you come from?" the Zeon asked again.

Kirk had discovered an informative clipboard. Flipping its pages, he read them hastily. Their phasers had been sent to Gestapo Command Headquarters for analysis. "We can forget about our phasers," he was telling Spock when the door was flung open. The SS Guard had learned that his keys were missing. He stared at Kirk and Spock, snapping his pistol up. The Zeon, out of his line of sight, struck him. The first blow was wild. But the second one dropped the trooper cold.

Kirk looked down at the felled man. "For peaceful people," he said, "you Zeons are very thorough."

They also learned quickly. The Zeon pointed to the trooper's uniform. "Wearing that, we might be able to steal a car and get out of the capital."

"We came here to find John Gill," Kirk said.

Spock spoke. "Captain, without phasers, and until we are able to communicate with the ship, it is illogical to assume we can hold out against the entire military force of this planet."

Kirk considered the point. "All right, Mr Spock. Get into that uniform and cover your ears again."

Within seconds, Spock was in full SS Lieutenant's regalia, his ears helmeted. Kirk, in the guard's outfit, found a stretcher piled on others in a corner of the laboratory. When they emerged from it, the Zeon lay on the stretcher, his eyes closed as though past an extremity of torture. The guard at the door snapped Spock a salute.

"Hunting's good," Kirk told him. "We've caught so many Zeons, we've got to dump them outside."

They got away with it. In the shadow of a building, they set the stretcher down. Spock said, "I suggest the guards will shortly notice our absence, Captain."

"There'll be a planet-wide alert," the Zeon warned them.

"We'll have to find someplace to hide until we can reassemble the communicators and get help from the *Enterprise*."

Kirk's remark seemed to deeply disturb the Zeon. He was clearly wrestling with some momentous decision.

"You could be spies," he said, "sent to find our underground hiding places." Then his face cleared. "But that's a chance I must take. I put my life in your hands. More important, I am putting the lives of our friends in your hands."

They followed him down the street, hugging the buildings' shadows until they came to a dark alley. It was dirty with a clutter of trash, garbage pails, a litter of empty tin cans. The Zeon went to the metal top of a manhole cover and rapped on it four times. Finally, from deep underground came the sound of four answering raps. The Zeon knocked at the manhole cover twice again, waving the two *Enterprise* men to a crouch as a patrol car, filled with troops, roared past the alley's entrance. When the noise had faded, the Zeon knocked again. The manhole cover lifted on a narrow, black opening.

"Come," said the Zeon.

A narrow metal ladder led down into the darkness. When they reached its last rung, a Zeon passed them and scrambled up to swing the metal cover shut again. He descended the ladder and their guide said, "Davod, you're well. How many are here?"

He wasn't answered. Davod was staring suspiciously at Kirk and Spock.

"They helped me escape from the prison! I owe them my life, Davod!"

"Isak!"

An older man, strong-faced, had entered the dim-lit room. "Abrom, thank God you're well." Their Zeon and the older man embraced. "This is my brother," their guide said. "Abrom, they were prisoners, beaten as I was."

Abrom's eyes were searching their faces. "Why were you in that prison?"

"I was trying to see the Führer," Kirk said.

"The Führer!"

"If I can see him, there may be a way to stop this insanity."

Isak said, "I owe them my life, Abrom."

Davod strode angrily out of the room and Abrom said, "Isak, Uletta is dead." After a moment, he added, "She was shot down in the street."

Isak's shocked face moved Kirk to ask, "Your sister?"

"She would have been my wife."

Abrom's voice shook. "She lived for five hours while they walked by her and spat on her. Our own people could do nothing to help. Yet you ask me to help strangers."

Isak lifted his face from the hands he had used to hide it. "If we adopt the ways of the Nazis, we are as bad as the Nazis."

Spock, hesitating to intrude on such private tragedy, motioned Kirk aside. "Captain, may I suggest the most profitable use of our time would be to reassemble the communicators?" He spoke gently to Abrom. "May I work over there undisturbed for a few moments?"

Abrom didn't speak. Finally, Isak nodded, and taking his brother by the shoulder, moved away. Kirk joined Spock at a table where they spread out the communicators' elements. Using parts of both, Spock put one together, and, handing it to Kirk, said, "I cannot be certain that the circuits are correct. There's no way to test it except by actual use."

Kirk was about to remind him that the *Enterprise* would be beyond range for another hour when there were shouts and the sound of a shot outside. The door was burst open. Two Storm Troopers armed with submachine guns broke into the room. With them, her lovely head held arrogantly high, was the girl in brown-shirt uniform they'd seen on the TV screen. She was wearing her iron cross.

Kirk remembered her name and her beauty.

"It's Daras," he told Spock.

"Quiet!" the girl shouted. "Over against the wall—all of you! Hands in the air, Zeon swine!"

She marched down the line of them, studying faces. Pausing when she came to Kirk, Spock and Isak, she, said, "You are the three who escaped from the Chancellery. What was your plan?"

A gun aimed at Kirk. "Speak now!" she said. "It's the last chance you'll get!"

"I must see the Führer. It is urgent."

She seized a gun from a trooper. "Urgent? Yes, I'll bet it is!"

Abrom tried to distract her attention from Kirk. "I alone am responsible for what happens here."

"Do you know what we do with responsible Zeons?"

Her finger depressed the gun's trigger. There was a burst of fire and Abrom fell.

"Now we finish the job!" she cried.

A trooper swung his gun to cover Isak, Spock and Kirk.

Isak exploded in fury. "Where do you stop, you Nazis? When you've killed the last of us, what will you do then? Turn your guns on yourselves?"

Kirk met Spock's eyes in a signal. They ducked, then hurled themselves forward. Spock came up under a trooper's gun, and Kirk, hitting the weapon in Daras's hands, wrenched it away from her. He whirled with it, covering the three Nazis.

"Wait!" Isak yelled to him. "Don't shoot!"

Abrom had gotten to his feet. "No more," he said. "You've proved you're on our side."

Bewildered, Kirk turned to Isak, who met his eyes bravely. "Forgive me," he said. "We had to be sure."

Abrom put his hand on Kirk's arm. "Taking you in could have betrayed all our people if you had been Nazi spies."

Isak rushed into explanation of his own. "The Gestapo's methods are frighteningly efficient. To survive, we must be careful. We in the underground don't even know who our leaders are. If we break under torture, we can betray only a handful of our people. Forgive me. It had to be done."

Spock was eyeing Daras. "I do not understand," he said. "You are a Nazi. A 'Hero of the Fatherland.' We saw you decorated."

"I'm an Ekosian… fighting the terrible thing that's happened to my people. The decoration was for betraying my own father to the Party."

At Kirk's look of revulsion, she added hastily, "My father's idea. He was very close to the Führer; but when he saw the change, where it was leading, he turned against the Party. He was imprisoned. Melakon sentenced him to death."

"Melakon?" Kirk said.

Abrom explained. "The Deputy Führer. He's taken over."

Daras spoke to Kirk. "My father denounced me, making it seem I had betrayed him. It gave me a weapon to continue the fight."

Spock was still trying to reconcile her story with facts as he knew them. "But how could that have seemed right to John Gill?"

"Who?" Abrom said.

"The Führer," Kirk said. "He's one of our people."

"What people is that?" Abrom asked.

Kirk hesitated a moment. "I'm Captain James Kirk of the United Space Ship *Enterprise*. This is my First Officer, Mr Spock. John Gill, your Führer, was sent here as a cultural observer by the Federation."

The statement stunned Daras. "The Führer is… is an alien?"

"That is correct," Spock said.

The girl's face was incredulous. "I grew up to admire him. Later, to hate, despise everything he stands for. But I always believed he was one of us. To learn he's an alien sent to destroy us—"

"That was not his mission-ever," Kirk said. "It was to report, not to interfere. Something went wrong. That's what we're here to find out. And to correct. We must see him."

"Impossible!" Isak exclaimed. "Even if this were some other time, it would be impossible. He sees no one, permits no one but Melakon to see him. He is under maximum security."

Kirk and Spock exchanged a look. "Under maximum security. Is he so afraid?" Kirk said.

Isak's fists had clenched. "There are many of us—Ekosians and younger Zeons—who would gladly give our lives to kill him!"

Kirk turned to him. "I can't explain what's happened. This is against every principle John Gill believed in. But our only chance is to see him—quickly."

"That's impossible now," Daras said shortly. "He makes a speech tonight from the Chancellery. The top Party officials will be there."

"Will you be there?" Kirk said.

"Of course." She added bitterly, "As the symbol of the proper attitude toward the Fatherland."

Spock spoke to Kirk. "As an honored member of the Party, she should be able to get us past the guards."

Daras protested. "Only a few of the top, most trusted Party members will be allowed into the Chancellery. The nation will watch on the viewscreens."

"You'll have to get us in there," Kirk said.

"Into the Chancellery? It would be suicide, Captain Kirk."

Isak turned to her. "It's a risk to live at all, the way things are going. If the Captain thinks he has a chance, I'm willing to commit suicide with him."

Daras whirled on him. "You? A Zeon? You expect to get into the Chancellery too?"

"It's my fight even more than yours!"

"If you'll risk it, Daras," Kirk said, "I have an idea that just might work."

It was a challenge she had to meet.

They had commandeered a command car. And Gestapo uniforms. Spock and Isak were helmeted as troopers, but Kirk, carrying a camera, wore a Captain's insignia. The other two held lights.

As Kirk saw the guards at the Chancellery entrance, he lifted the camera to conceal his face, saying, "Turn on the lights."

The guards squinted angrily in the sudden glare. One said, "You. What is your business here?"

The second command car pulled up at the curb, and as Daras got out of it, Kirk, Spock and Isak gathered around her, photographing her. She smiled, waving for the camera, then mounted the steps. Still shooting, still flaring the lights, the three fell into line behind her. The guards had recognized her. Passing them, she said, "The Führer's special documentary corps. The door, please, Corporal. And smile at me as I enter it."

Dazzled but smiling, the guard opened the door.

The party moved forward into a corridor. Daras was trembling. Spock lowered his voice. "You know, Captain, I begin to sense what you Earthmen enjoy in gambling. However carefully one computes the odds of success, there is a certain exhilaration in the risk."

"We may make a human of you yet, Mr Spock—if we live long enough."

The open doors of the audience chamber, holding a collection of Party officials, were directly ahead of them.

Kirk spoke to Daras. "Where does the Führer enter?"

"He doesn't. They watch him on that big screen. He broadcasts from the end of the room where the two guards are. For security."

Kirk saw a window at the end of the room, draped and flanked by the two guards.

"Where's the entrance?" Kirk said.

"It's heavily guarded, Captain."

"Where?" he said again.

"Straight down the corridor."

Kirk was getting his bearings. The guards were armed with submachine guns. They were standing on either side of a door. One of them peered through a small window set into the door.

"You're not going to try to get into the broadcast room?" Daras whispered.

"We're going to look," Kirk told her.

Isak spoke. "Distract the guard long enough for me to get the machine gun. The broadcasting room is a small booth. I could shoot through the door."

Kirk turned quickly, his voice hard. "You're not here for your personal satisfaction. We need Gill and we need him alive. Is that clear?"

Isak finally nodded resignedly. He moved forward with them and a guard, gun raised, stepped toward them. Kirk was abruptly full of business as a documentary cameraman.

"Hold it there," he told the guard. "This is for the record of the Führer's Final Solution speech. The behind-the-scenes story."

"We want to photograph the men responsible for the Führer's safety," Isak said. "The men who make the Führer's decisions possible."

Daras's presence with the trio reassured the man. He returned to the door and, standing at attention, turned his best profile for the camera. Kirk spoke to the other guard. "You. Over there. I want you together, guns held at the ready."

They moved away from the door, and Kirk positioned them so that Spock could look through its tiny window. He spotted Gill sitting at a table, facing a TV camera. He nodded to Kirk. The guards moved back and Kirk said, "Thank you. There'll be more coverage later."

Spock had rejoined Kirk. "It *is* John Gill. But he did not move, did not once look up, Captain."

"That might be part of the plan—the semi-divine detachment."

"Or a deep psychosis," Spock said.

"It might be even simpler. He could be drugged. We need McCoy, Mr Spock." He turned to Daras. "Is there a place we can be alone for a few minutes? I'm going to send for help. There's no time to explain. A closet—any place will do."

"The cloakroom," Isak suggested.

Alone with Kirk, Spock made last adjustments on the communicator. He flipped it open. "Spock to *Enterprise*. Come in, *Enterprise*…"

On the Starship, reception was bad. Uhura made hasty moves with her switches. "*Enterprise*, Lieutenant Uhura."

Kirk took the communicator. "This is the Captain. Put Dr McCoy on."

"Yes, sir. We don't read you well. You're nine points into the low frequency band."

"We've had some difficulty, Lieutenant. Patch historical computer into ship's uniform section. I want McCoy outfitted as a Gestapo doctor, Nazi Germany, old Earth date 1944. Make him a colonel."

"Yes, sir. Dr McCoy coming on."

"McCoy here, Captain."

"Bones, we need you. Have Transporter lock on these coordinates."

"What have you got, Jim?"

"We've found John Gill. At least, we've seen him. He may be drugged or hypnotized or psychotic. You'll have to make a determination. Hurry with that uniform."

Daras opened the cloakroom door, her face ashen. "Isak just heard two security men talking. They picked up your broadcast and pinpointed it within this building. They're starting a search."

Spock closed the cloakroom door. "If there's a delay in transporting Dr McCoy, I suggest we cancel the plan."

Kirk spoke again into the communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. What's happening?"

"The Doctor is in the Transporter, sir. He's having trouble with the uniform."

"Send him down naked if you have to. Kirk out."

But the shimmer had appeared near a corner of the cloakroom. Daras fell back, her face blank with amazement as the sparkles materialized into McCoy. He held the uniform's coat over an arm and was clutching a boot.

"It's… true," Daras whispered. "I only half-believed the things you said. But this—it's magnificent."

McCoy sat down on a bench, trying to pull on the boot. "Stupid computer made a mistake in the measurements. The right boot's too tight." He jerked at it angrily.

"Doctor, there's a logical way to proceed," Spock said. "Point your toe, pull with a steady, unemotional pressure on either side of the boot. We have no time to waste on emotionalism."

McCoy gave him a sour glance but obeyed. The boot went on. "This is Dr McCoy, our Chief Medical Officer," Spock told Daras. "Doctor, Daras, secretary of the National Socialist Party."

Shouldering into the coat, McCoy said, "How do you do? Now what's this about John Gill, Jim?"

The door was kicked open. A grim-faced Eneg, followed by two troopers, submachine guns leveled, walked into the room.

They had all tensed, waiting for immediate death. When it didn't come, Daras fumbled for a cover story. "Chairman Eneg—" she nodded at McCoy "—the Colonel… has had too much to drink."

"I see," Eneg said.

Kirk and Spock had averted their faces lest the Party Chairman recognize them. Kirk, his face still turned, said, "We were afraid he would embarrass the Führer."

"A doctor should have more pride," Daras said.

Eneg nodded. "You were right to conceal him. There is a spy in this building with a secret transmitter. We're conducting a search. Hail the Führer!"

After a startled pause, Kirk, Spock and Daras snapped a salute in reply. Eneg left and a trooper pulled the door shut behind them. Kirk drew a deep breath, and Spock said, "I do not understand how he could have failed to recognize us."

"This is our lucky day. Luck, Mr Spock, is something you refuse to recognize."

"I shall reconsider, Captain."

Out in the corridor, a buzzer sounded. "It's the Führer's speech," Daras said quickly.

"Let's go," Kirk said.

They followed her out of the cloakroom, down the corridor and into the main room. Isak saw them come in and nodded, relieved. The TV screen imaged a Nazi banner, then cut quickly to a close shot of the Führer. There was a general shout of "Hail the Führer!" Kirk, Spock and McCoy mouthed the slogan. The TV camera angle had been planned for drama, leaving the screened face half-shadowed. The voice coming from the speaker was calm, reasoned.

"Ekosians, the job ahead is difficult. It requires courage and dedication. It requires faith."

Wild applause broke out. The voice went on. "The Zeon colony has existed for nearly half a century…"

"Watch the mouth," Kirk whispered to McCoy.

But the camera had switched to a low shot in which the table's microphone hid the lower portion of the Führer's face.

"If we fulfill our own greatness, that will all be ended." Excited cheers broke into the voice. When they ended, the voice said, "Working together we can find a solution."

Spock leaned to Kirk. "The speech does not follow any logical pattern, Captain."

"Just random sentences strung together."

"He looks drugged, Jim, at an almost cataleptic stage," McCoy said.

The voice was back. "What we do may sometimes be difficult, but it is necessary if we are to reach our goal. And we will reach that goal."

McCoy had straightened in his seat. "We've got to get close to him."

Daras stared at him. Then she rose, starting to edge her way through the crowd toward the door. Isak joined them, helping to clear a path. A few annoyed faces turned, then broke into smiles as Daras was recognized. As the others followed her, the irritation came back, but McCoy's Gestapo uniform aroused respect. They made the corridor.

They could hear the voice continuing the speech.

"Every action we take must be decisive. Every thought directed toward a goal. This planet can become a paradise if we are willing to pay the price…"

At the windowed door of the broadcast booth, the guards were listening to their Führer's voice, but their machine guns were still leveled. Isak held the lights as Kirk arranged his camera. "I want a picture of you two with the Hero of the Fatherland as you all listen to the Führer's stirring words." He turned to Daras. "There, stand between them."

The flattered men made room for her while the voice said, "As each cell of the body works in discipline and harmony for the good of the entire being…"

Kirk, lining up the shot through his camera, nodded, and McCoy chopped a guard across the neck. Spock neck-pinched the second one. Both dropped. Spock tried the door and found it locked.

"? so must each of you work to make our dream a reality—to find a lasting solution. Long live Ekos. Long live our Party!"

A storm of cheers greeted John Gill's final words. Kirk and McCoy, searching the guards' pockets, came up with a key. It opened the booth's door. As the group entered, the Führerdidn't move. Kirk and Isak dragged in the guards. Over their heads, a wall monitor showed Melakon standing at the main room's podium. He gestured for silence. "The Führer has given us our orders. And we pledge him our lives in the sacred task. Death to Zeon!"

"Death to Zeon!" the crowd shouted.

McCoy straightened from examining Gill. "Definitely drugged. Almost comatose."

"What drug?" Spock said.

"I can't identify it without a medi-comp. And without knowing, giving an antidote could be dangerous."

"Is there anything you can do, Bones?"

"A general stimulant, but it's risky."

As Kirk said, "Take the risk," Melakon was speaking from the monitor.

"For years we have been defiled by the Zeon presence on our planet. We've tried many solutions to the Zeon problem-limiting them to separate areas of our cities, confining them. But despite our best efforts, they remain like a cancer, eating away at our state…"

McCoy gave Gill a hypo injection. Watching, Isak said, "There's no reaction. Whatever you gave him, it isn't working."

While McCoy used his scanner, Melakon was saying, "Like a disease, the Zeons appear from every side. You smash one, and two more turn up. Ten minutes ago, on our Führer's orders, our troops began their historic mission. In our cities, the elimination has started. Within an hour, the Zeon blight will be forever removed from the face of Ekos."

Kirk leaned over Gill. "Can you increase the dosage?"

"I'm working in the dark, Jim. I could kill him."

Daras said, "If they find us here, we'll all be killed."

At Kirk's nod, McCoy used the hypo again.

Daras turned to Isak. "It's begun. It's finally begun." She had covered her face with her hands when McCoy looked up at Kirk. "The stimulant's working. He's near the level of consciousness." He lifted one of Gill's eyelids. "As though he's in a light sleep. That's as much as I dare do."

"Spock, see if you can get through to him by the mind probe. If you can't, Bones will have to use a heavier dose, no matter what it does."

There was a roar from the monitor. Old-fashioned rockets were taking off from launching pads; and Melakon's voice said, "Our space fleet is now on its way toward Zeon, both manned and unmanned weapons. This is the time of destiny! Hail the Führer!" There was a pause. "Hail Victory, Ekosians!"

Daras went to Kirk. "There's one chance left. With the weapons you have, you could destroy the fleet!"

Kirk shook his head. "That would mean the death of thousands of Ekosian spacemen."

The crowd was chanting from the monitor, "Hail Victory! Hail Victory!"

Daras cried, "But against those thousands are millions upon millions of innocent Zeon lives! We must choose the lesser of two evils, Captain!"

"We could save Zeon that way, Daras—but not Ekos."

Spock had completed his mind probe. "Captain, in his condition, Gill cannot *initiate* speech or any other function. But he can reply to direct questions."

Kirk looked at his one-time teacher. "They've kept what's left of him as a figurehead."

"Exactly, Captain. The real power, for these last years, has been Melakon."

"Turn that monitor speaker down," Kirk told Daras. As quiet filled the room, he went to Gill, bending over the table. "Gill, why did you abandon your mission? Why did you interfere in this culture?"

The face was expressionless and the voice barely audible. "Planet… fragmented… divided. Took lesson… from Earth history…"

"Why Nazi Germany?" Kirk said. "I took that history course from you. You knew what the Nazis were like!"

"Most… efficient state… Earth… ever knew…"

Spock spoke. "True, Captain. That tiny country, divided, beaten, bankrupt, rose in a few years to stand only one step from global domination."

"It was brutal, perverted! It had to be destroyed at a terrible cost! Why pick that example?"

"Perhaps Gill felt that such a state, run benignly, could accomplish efficiency without sadism."

"Worked," Gill said. "At first… it worked. Then Melakon began… takeover, used the… gave me the drug…"

He fell silent.

"Gill! Gill, can you hear me? You'll have to tell these people what happened. You're the only one who can stop the slaughter!"

Gill slumped. McCoy, running his scanner over him, shook his head. "He's still alive, but the drug they use is too strong."

"Give him another shot," Kirk said.

Daras turned from the door, crying, "Guards!"

"Bones, we're out of time—"

SS men were running to the broadcast booth, Eneg behind them. Kirk issued orders hard and fast. "Spock, take off that helmet! Daras, draw your gun! You, too, McCoy and Isak! Draw your guns! Point them at Spock!"

The guards rushed in. Behind them Eneg took in the spectacle of the three guns trained at Spock's head. Kirk indicated Daras. "She's just captured a Zeon spy who was attempting to assassinate the Führer. We'll make a present of him to Melakon."

The guards grabbed Spock, and Isak spoke quickly to Eneg. "Chairman, we *must* take this spy to Melakon!"

Eneg was looking at their faces, one by one. Finally, he turned to the guards. "Pass them on my responsibility." He left, and Isak, whispering to Daras, said, "I wasn't allowed to tell you. Eneg is with us." He spoke to a guard. "You heard the Chairman. Bring the spy along." The two guards stood aside while he, Daras and McCoy took Spock outside the broadcast booth and into the corridor. Kirk hung back, his eyes on the hypo that still lay on the table.

Melakon was surrounded by congratulating admirers. The guards moved in to push Spock through the throng.

"What's this?" Melakon demanded.

Isak answered. "A spy, Excellency."

"A rare prize." Daras had stepped forward. "The Deputy Führer can see this is no ordinary Zeon."

In the broadcast booth, Kirk finished injecting more hypo stimulant into Gill's arm. "Professor Gill, can you hear me now? You've got to speak. This is our last chance. Please come out of it!"

Melakon was interested in the spy. He had seized Spock's chin, turning it to examine his profile. "Not a Zeon. Definitely not."

"The Deputy Führer," Daras said, "is an authority on the genetics of racial purity. How would he classify this specimen?"

"Difficult. A very difficult question from such a charming questioner." He returned to his study of Spock, pleased to parade his knowledge. "Note those sinister eyes, the malformed ears. Definitely an inferior race."

Kirk was struggling to get Gill on his feet "You're the only one who can stop them! You've got to speak!"

Under his glazed eyes, Gill opened his mouth. Then he slumped again.

Melakon meanwhile was discovering other stigmata of racial inferiority in Spock. "Note the low forehead, denoting stupidity. The dull look of a trapped animal…"

Spock's right eyebrow lifted; and Melakon spoke to the guard. "You may take him now for interrogation. But I want the body saved for the cultural museum. He'll make an interesting display."

There was a stir in the crowd. A startled murmur grew. Melakon turned toward the podium. Gill had appeared on the screen. He was swaying, staring dazedly at nothing. After one horrified look, Melakon spoke to one of Spock's guards.

"Go to the booth. See to the Führer at once. He is ill. Turn off that camera in there!"

Gill opened his mouth. "People… of Ekos. Hear me…"

Melakon whirled to the audience. "The Führer is ill. The strain of the day has been too much!"

Gill, Kirk in the shadows behind him, fought to go on. Melakon's voice came over the speaker in the broadcast booth. "I suggest we all leave the hall. Let our Führer rest!"

Kirk saw the handle of the booth door turn. The door was locked, but the guard outside began to pound on it. Gill's voice was stronger. "People of Ekos. We've been betrayed by a self-seeking adventurer who has led us all to the brink of disaster. To Zeon, I swear this was not aggression by the Ekosian people…"

The guard ran back to whisper in Melakon's ear; and Gill said, "? only of one evil man. Melakon is a traitor to his own people and to all that we stand for…"

Melakon grabbed the guard's machine gun and, swinging around, leveled it at the booth curtain.

"To the Zeon people," Gill was saying, "I pledge reparation and goodwill."

Melakon sprayed a lethal hail of lead into the curtain. The crowd was silent, stunned. The booth window shattered as Kirk dived forward, dragging Gill to the floor.

Melakon continued to fire into the booth. Isak drew his pistol and pulled the trigger. Melakon jerked forward under the shot's impact, tried to train his gun on Isak—and collapsed. An SS Colonel snatched the weapon from his hands and pointed it at Isak.

"Hold it, Colonel!"

It was Eneg. "There has been enough killing." The Colonel hesitated and Eneg said, "Now we'll start to live the way the Führer intended us to live!"

The Colonel dropped the gun.

Gill's eyes were clear, but the breast of his uniform was crimson. As Kirk cradled his head in his arms, a tiny trickle of blood flowed from his mouth. He looked up at Kirk, recognizing him. "I was wrong," he whispered. "The noninterference directive is the only way. We must stop the slaughter…"

"You did that, Professor. You told them in time."

"Even historians fail to learn from history—repeat the same mistakes. Let the killing end, Kirk. Let—"

He choked on a bloody sob and crumpled in Kirk's arms.

"Professor…?"

He looked up at the sound of Spock's voice. "Captain, are you all right?"

"Yes, Mr Spock."

He lowered Gill to the floor, got up and unlocked the door.

Eneg was standing beside Spock. Behind them, McCoy, Daras and Isak waited, their faces solemn as though they knew what he had to tell them.

"He's dead."

There was a long stillness before Isak said, "For so long I've prayed to hear that. Now I'm sorry."

"So was he," Kirk said.

Isak moved to him. "You have given the rest of us a new chance."

"I thank you too," Eneg said. "But go now. We must do the rest."

"Eneg and I," Daras said, "will go on the air now… offer a plan to our people… for all our people—Ekosians and Zeons alike."

As Eneg followed her into the broadcast booth, he turned to say, "It is time to stop the bloodshed—to bury our dead."

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "I think the planet is in good hands."

"Indeed, Captain. With a union of two cultures, this system would make a fine addition to the Federation."

Kirk opened his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"*Enterprise* here, Captain."

"Beam us aboard, Lieutenant Uhura."

Their Ekosian experience still mystified Spock. He left his bridge station to go to Kirk. "I will never understand humans, Captain. How could a man as brilliant, a mind as logical as John Gill's have made such a fatal mistake?"

"He drew a wrong conclusion from history. The trouble with the Nazis wasn't simply that their leaders were evil and psychotic men. They were. But the real trouble was the leader principle."

McCoy had joined them. "A man who holds that much power, Spock, even with the best intentions, can't resist the urge to play God."

"I was able to gather the meaning, Doctor," Spock said.

"There's an old Earth saying," Kirk said, "that everything happens for the best. John Gill found Ekos divided. He leaves it unified."

"That also proves another Earth saying, Spock. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Damn clever, these Earthmen, wouldn't you say?"

Spock turned to McCoy. "Earthmen such as Rameses, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, Lee Kuan. Your whole history is Man seeking absolute power."

"Now just a minute, Spock—"

Kirk looked at them. "Gentlemen," he said, "we've just been through one civil war. Let's not start another."

THE ULTIMATE COMPUTER

(D. C. Fontana and Laurence N. Wolfe)

Obediently the *Enterprise* (to its skipper's intense annoyance) was making its approach to the space station. His impatience lifted him from his chair and sent him across to Uhura. "Lieutenant, contact the space station."

"The station is calling *us,* Captain."

"Put them on."

The voice was familiar. "Captain Kirk, this is Commodore Enwright."

"Commodore, I'd like an explanation."

Enwright cut across him. "The explanation is beaming aboard you now, Captain. He may already be in your Transporter Room. Enwright out."

"Spock," Kirk said, and gestured toward the elevator. "Scotty, you have the con."

The "explanation" was materializing in the person of Commodore Wesley, a flight officer slightly older than Kirk but not unlike him in manner and military bearing. Kirk's rage gave way to astonishment. "Bob! Bob Wesley!" The two shook hands as Wesley stepped from the platform. Kirk said, "Mr Spock, this is—"

Spock completed the sentence. "Commodore Wesley. How do you do, sir."

Wesley nodded. "Mr Spock."

Kirk turned to the Transporter officer. "Thank you, Lieutenant. That will do."

As the door closed, he burst out. "Now will you please tell me what this is all about? I receive an order to proceed here. No reason is given. I'm informed my crew is to be removed to the space station's security holding area. I think I'm entitled to an explanation!"

Wesley grinned. "You've had a singular honor conferred on you, Jim. You're going to be the fox in a hunt."

"What does that mean?"

"War games. I'll be commanding the attack force against you."

"An entire attack force against one ship?"

Wesley regarded him tolerantly. "Apparently you haven't heard of the M-5 Multitronic Unit. It's the computer, Jim, that Dr Richard Daystrom has just developed."

"Oh?"

"Not oh, Jim. Wait till you see the M-5."

"What is it?"

Spock broke in. "The most ambitious computer complex ever created. Its purpose is to correlate all computer activity of a Starship… to provide the ultimate in vessel operation and control."

Wesley eyed Spock suspiciously. "How do you know so much about it, Commander?"

"I hold an A-7 computer expert classification, sir. I am well acquainted with Dr Daystrom's theories and discoveries. The basic design of all our ships' computers are Dr Daystrom's."

"And what's all that got to do with the *Enterprise?*" Kirk said.

Wesley's face grew grave. "You've been chosen to test the M-5, Jim. There'll be a series of routine research and contact problems M-5 will have to solve as well as navigational maneuvers and the war-games' problems. If it works under actual conditions as it has in simulated tests, it will mean a revolution in space technology as great as the Warp Drive. As soon as your crew is removed, the ship's engineering section will be modified to contain the computer."

"Why remove my crew? What sort of security does this gadget require?"

"They're not needed," Wesley said. "Dr Daystrom will see to the installation himself and will supervise the tests. When he's ready, you will receive your orders and proceed on the mission with a crew of twenty."

"*Twenty!* I can't run a Starship with only twenty people aboard!"

The voice of authority was cool. "M-5 can."

"And I—what am I supposed to do?"

"You've got a great job, Jim. All you have to do is sit back and let the machine do the work."

"My," Kirk said, "it sounds just great!"

McCoy didn't like it, either. Told the news, he exploded. "A vessel this size can't be run by one computer! Even the computers we already have—"

Spock interrupted. "All of them were designed by Richard Daystrom almost twenty-five years ago. His new one utilizes the capabilities of all the present computers… it is the master control. We are attempting to prove that it can run this ship more efficiently than man."

"Maybe *you're* trying to prove that, Spock, but don't count me in on it."

"The most unfortunate lack in current computer programming is that there is nothing available to immediately replace the Starship surgeon."

"If there were," McCoy said, "they wouldn't have to replace me. I'd resign—and because everybody else aboard would be nothing but circuits and memory banks." He glared at Spock. "I think some of us already are just that." He turned an anxious face to Kirk. "You haven't said much about this, Jim."

They were standing outside the Engineering Section. Now Kirk swung around to face Spock and McCoy, pointing to the new sign on the door reading "Security Area". "What do you want me to say, Bones? Starfleet considers this installation of the M-5 an honor. So I'm honored. It takes some adjusting, too." He turned, the door slid open, and they entered the Section. And the M-5 Multitronic Unit already dominated the vast expanse. Unlike the built-in *Enterprise* computers, its massive cabinet was free-standing as though asserting total independence of support. It possessed a monitor panel where dials, switches, and other controls were ranged in an order that created an impression of an insane disorder. Scott and another engineer, Ensign Harper, were busy at panels near the upper-bridge level. Kirk looked around. "Where is he? Dr Daystrom?"

He came from behind the console where he had been working, wearing a technician's outfit. The first thing that struck Kirk about him were his eyes. Despite the lines of middle age, they were brilliantly piercing as though all his energy was concentrated on penetration. He was a nervous man. His speech was sharply clipped and his hands seemed to need to busy themselves with something—a pipe, a tool, anything available.

"Yes?" he said. Suddenly, he seemed to register something inappropriate in the greeting. "You would be Captain Kirk?"

They shook hands briefly. "Dr Daystrom, my First Officer, Commander Spock."

Spock bowed. “I am honored, Doctor. I have studied all your publications on computer technology. Brilliant.”

“Thank you. Captain, I have finished my final check on M-5. It must be hooked into the ship’s main power banks to become operational.”

Kirk said, “Very well, Dr Daystrom. Do so.”

“Your Chief Engineer refused to make the power available without your orders.”

Good old Scotty, Kirk thought. What he said was, “Mr Scott, tie the M-5 unit into the main power banks.”

“Aye, sir. Mr Harper?” He and Harper moved off to the wall panel near the forced perspective unit.

Spock was examining the M-5 monitor panel. McCoy fixed his gaze on the distance.

“Fascinating, Doctor,” Spock said. “This computer has a potential beyond anything you have ever done. Even your breakthrough into duotronics did not hold the promise of this.”

“M-5 has been perfected, Commander. Its potential is a fact.”

McCoy could contain himself no longer. The only fact I care about,” he said savagely, “is that if this thing doesn’t work, there aren’t enough men aboard to run this ship. That’s screaming for trouble.”

Daystrom stared at him. “Who is this?” he asked Kirk.

“Dr Leonard McCoy, Senior Medical Officer.”

“This is a security area,” Daystrom said. “Only absolutely necessary key personnel have clearance to enter it.”

Kirk’s voice was icy in his own ears. “Dr McCoy has top security clearances for all areas of this ship.”

Then the M-5 suddenly came to life. It was a startling phenomenon. It flashed with lights, a deep hum surging from its abruptly activated circuits. As its lights glowed brighter, lights in the engine unit dimmed sharply.

McCoy spoke to Spock. “Is it supposed to do that?”

Daystrom was working quickly to remove a panel. He made an adjustment and Spock said, “If I can be of assistance, sir…”

Daystrom looked up. “No. I can manage, thank you.”

The rebuffed Spock’s eyebrows arched in surprise. He glanced at Kirk who nodded and Spock backed off. The M-5's deep hum grew quieter, less erratic; and overhead, the lights struggled back to full strength.

Daystrom was defensive. “Nothing wrong, Captain. A minor settling-in adjustment to be made. You see, everything is in order now.”

“Yes.” Kirk paused. “I’m curious, Dr Daystrom. Why is it M-5 instead of M-l?”

Daystrom’s hands twisted on a tool. “The Multitronic Units 1 through 4 were not successful. But this one is. M-5 is ready to assume control of the ship.”

“Total control?” Kirk said.

“That is what it was designed for, Captain.”

There was an awkward silence. “I’m afraid,” Kirk said, “I must admit to a certain antagonism toward your computer, Dr Daystrom. It was man who first ventured into space. True, man *with* machines… but still with man in command.”

“Those were primitive machines, Captain. We have entered a new era.”

Kirk thought, I don’t like this man. He dispensed with the amiable smile on his lips. “I am not against progress, sir; but there are still things men have to do to remain men. Your computer would take that away, Dr Daystrom.”

'There are other things a man like you can do, Captain. Or perhaps you only object to the possible loss of the prestige accorded a Starship Captain. The computer can do your job without interest in prestige.”

Kirk smiled at him. “You’re going to have to prove that to me, Daystrom.” He started to leave, but Daystrom’s voice halted him in midstride. “Captain, that’s what the M-5 is here for, isn’t it?”

It had not been a pleasant encounter. Spock alone seemed untouched by its implications. As the three moved down the drearily empty corridor, he said, “Captain, if you don’t need me for a moment, I’d like to discuss some of the technology involved in the M-5 with Dr Daystrom.”

“Look at the love-light in his eyes, Jim. All his life Spock’s been waiting for the right computer to come along. I hope you’ll be very happy together, Spock.”

“Doctor, I find your simile illogical and your humor forced. If you’ll excuse me, Captain?”

“Go ahead, Mr Spock. I’ll see you on the bridge.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kirk’s troubled expression worried McCoy. “What is it, Jim?”

Kirk hesitated. "I feel it's wrong—and I don't know why—all of it wrong."

"I feel it's wrong, too, replacing men with mindless machines."

"It isn't just that, Bones. Only a fool would stand in the way of progress, if this *is* progress. You have all my psychological profiles. Do you think I *am* afraid to turn command over to the M-5?"

McCoy spoke thoughtfully. "We've all seen the advances of mechanization; and Daystrom *did* design the computers that run this ship."

"But under *human* control," Kirk said. "What I'm asking myself is: Is it just that I'm afraid of that computer taking over my job? Daystrom is right. I could do other things. Or am I really afraid of losing the prestige, the glamour accorded a Starship Captain? Is that why I keep fighting this thing? Am I really that petty and vain?"

"Jim, if you have the courageous awareness to ask yourself that question, you don't need me to answer it." He grinned. "Why don't you ask James T. Kirk? He's a pretty honest guy."

"Right now, Bones, I'm not sure he'd give me an honest answer."

But he was sure of one thing: he resented the installation of the new control console on his command chair. It had been placed on the left side of it opposite the one containing his old one with its intercom and other switches. It had been added to the chair without any consultation or announcement of the innovation. Kirk stared at it silently and Sulu said, "Turning back on original course, Captain."

Spock came over to examine the new console. "The M-5 has performed admirably so far, sir."

"All it's done is make some required course changes and simple turns. Chekov and Sulu could do that with their eyes closed."

Daystrom had appeared at his left side. "The idea is that they didn't *have* to do it, Captain. And it's not necessary for you to regain control from a unit after each maneuver is completed."

Kirk spoke tightly. "My orders say nothing about how long I must leave the M-5 in control of my ship. And I shall run it as I see fit, Dr Daystrom."

Spock said, "Captain, I must agree with Dr Daystrom. With the course information plotted into it, the computer could have brought us here as easily as the navigator."

"Mr Spock, you seem to enjoy entrusting yourself to that computer."

"Enjoy, sir? I am, of course, gratified to see the new unit executing everything in such a highly efficient manner. M-5 is another distinguished triumph in Dr Daystrom's career."

Chekov spoke tonelessly. "Approaching Alpha Cazinae II, Captain. ETA five minutes."

"The M-5 is to handle the approach, Captain," Daystrom said. "It will direct entrance into orbit and then analyze data for landing-party recommendations."

Kirk's voice was very quiet. "You don't mind if I make my own recommendations?"

"If you feel you need the exercise, go ahead, Captain."

Kirk looked into the coldly piercing eyes. Then, reaching out, he pressed one of the buttons on the new console panel.

In the same inflectionless voice, he said, "M-5 is now committed."

As the subdued hum in the ship grew louder, the main viewing screen showed the approaching planet. Kirk, his eyes on it, said, "Standard orbit, Mr Sulu."

Sulu, checking instruments, looked up in surprise. "Captain, M-5 has calculated that. The orbit is already plotted."

"Ah, yes," Kirk said. Spock had moved back to his station but Daystrom, pleased by his invention's performance, remained beside the new command console.

"Standard orbit achieved, sir," Sulu said.

"Report, Mr Spock."

"The planet is Class M, sir. Oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, suitable for human life support… two major land masses… a number of islands. Life form readings."

In the Engineering Section, the overhead lights flickered a moment; and on the deserted Deck 4, they went out, plunging the area into blackness.

Scott turned abruptly to Kirk, frowning. "Captain, we're getting some peculiar readings. Power shutdowns on Deck 4—lights, environmental control."

Kirk said, "Check it out, Mr Scott." He crossed over to Spock. The library-computer was chattering rapidly. Daystrom joined them. They saw a tape cartridge slide smoothly out of a slot. Spock took it, examining it. "M-5's readout, Captain."

Kirk drew a deep breath. "All right. My recommendations are as follows. We send down a general survey party, avoiding contact with life forms on the planet. Landing party to consist of myself,

Dr McCoy, astrobiologist Mason, geologist Rawls and Science Officer Spock."

"Mr Spock," said Daystrom, "play M-5"s recommendations."

Spock dropped the cartridge into another slot in his library-computer, and punching a button, he evoked a computer voice. It said, "M-5 readout. Planet Alpha Cazinae II. Class M. Atmosphere oxygen-nitrogen…"

On Deck 6 the lights suddenly faded—and darkness flooded into another area of the *Enterprise.*

Scott cried, "Now power's gone off on Deck 6!" The computer voice went on. "Categorization of life form readings recorded. Recommendations for general survey party: Science Officer Spock, astrobiologist Mason, geologist Carstairs."

Kirk let a moment go by. "The only variation in reports and recommendations is in landing party personnel. And that's only a matter of judgment."

"Judgment, Captain?" said Daystrom.

"Captain… the computer does not judge," Spock said. "It makes logical selections."

"Then why did it pick Carstairs instead of Rawls?

Carstairs is an Ensign, Mr Spock, no experience: this is his first tour of duty. Rawls is the Chief Geologist.

"Perhaps, Captain, you're really interested in why M-5 didn't name you and Dr McCoy."

"Not necessarily, Daystrom," Kirk said smoothly.

"Let's find out anyway." Daystrom hit a switch. "M-5 tie-in. Explanation for landing-party recommendations."

The computer voice said, "M-5. General survey party requires direction of Science Officer. Astro-biologist Mason has surveyed 29 biologically similar planets. Geologist Carstairs served on merchant-marine freighters in this area… once visited planet on geology survey for mining company."

"M-5 tie-in. Why were the Captain and Chief Medical Officer not included in the recommendations?"

"M-5," said the computer. "Non-essential personnel."

Spock averted his eyes from Kirk's face; and Scott, over at his board, called, "Captain! I've located the source of the power shutdowns. It's the M-5 unit, sir. That thing's turning off systems all over the ship!"

"Well, Dr Daystrom," Kirk said, "do we visit the Engineering Section?" He stood aside while the inventor removed a panel from

the huge mechanism. A moment or so later, he replaced it, saying, "As I suspected, it's not a malfunction in this series of circuits. There is no need to check further. The M-5 is simply shutting down power to areas of the ship that don't require it. Decks 4 and 6 are quarter decks, are they not?"

"Yes."

"And currently unoccupied."

Spock was examining the great monitor panel. "I am not familiar with these instruments, Dr Daystrom. You are using an entirely new control system… but it appears to me the unit is drawing more power than before."

"Quite right. As the unit is called upon to do more work, it pulls more power to accomplish it… just as the human body draws on more power, more energy to run than to stand still."

"Dr Daystrom," Spock said, "this is not a human body. A computer can process the information—but only that which is put into it."

Kirk nodded. "Granted it can work thousands, millions of times faster than a human brain. But it can't make value judgments. It doesn't have intuition. It can't *think* nor gauge relative importances."

Daystrom flushed angrily. "Can't you understand the unit is a revolution in computer science? I designed the duotronic elements used in your ship right now. And they are as archaic as dinosaurs compared to the M-5—" He was interrupted by a bosun's whistle and Uhura's filtered voice.

"Captain Kirk and Mr Spock to the bridge, please."

Kirk crossed to the intercom. "This is Kirk. What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Sensors are picking up a vessel paralleling our course, sir. As yet unidentified."

As he turned from the intercom, he realized the M-5 had again increased its humming and light activity. He looked at it dubiously and said, "Mr Spock." Descending the ladder, his last glimpse of Daystrom showed the man's hand patting the computer caressingly. The high hum followed them to the bridge where McCoy, his jaw set, was waiting for them.

"What are you doing up here, Bones?"

"Why wouldn't I be here? Sickbay systems are shut down until such time as the M-5 is informed there are patients to be cared for."

Spock, over at his station, spoke hastily. "Sir, sensor reports indicate two contacts; one on the port bow, the other on the stern. Distance, two hundred thousand kilometers and closing."

"Identification?"

"Sir, the M-5 unit has already identified the vessels as Federation Starships *Excalibur* and *Lexington.*"

Kirk looked at him. It was impossible to tell whether Spock was impressed or annoyed that the M-5 had done his job for him. "We were not scheduled for war games in this area, Captain. It may be a surprise attack as a problem for M-5."

Uhura spoke. "Priority alert message coming in, sir."

Daystrom came from the elevator as Kirk said, "On audio, Lieutenant." He paused at the sound of Wesley's voice.

"*Enterprise* from Commodore Wesley aboard the U.S.S. *Lexington,* This is an unscheduled M-5 drill. I repeat, this is an M-5 drill. *Enterprise,* acknowledge on this frequency."

Kirk nodded at Uhura. "Acknowledge, Lieutenant."

Uhura reached to press a button, hesitated, and stared at Kirk. "M-5 is acknowledging for us, sir."

"Then sound red alert, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir." But as she moved for the switch, the red alert sounded. "M-5 has already sounded the alert, Captain."

"Has it?" Kirk said. He turned to Sulu. "Phasers on l/100th power, Mr Sulu. No damage potential. Just enough to nudge them."

"Phasers l/100th power, sir." As Sulu turned back to his board, the ship was struck by a salvo from one of the attacking Starships. A bare thump. Spock called, "Phaser hit on port deflector 4, sir." Sulu looked up. "Speed is increasing to Warp 3, sir. Turning now to 112 Mark 5." A moment passed before he added, "Phasers locking on target, Captain."

Then it was Chekov's turn. "Enemy vessel closing with us, sir. Coming in fast. It—"

Sulu interrupted him. "Deflectors down now, sir! Main phasers firing!" Then he cried out in delight. "A hit, sir! Two more!" But the elation in his face faded abruptly at the sight of Kirk, sitting stiff and unmoving in his chair, merely watching the screen.

Chekov spoke quietly. "Changing course now to 28 Mark 42, sir."

The reports piled up thick and fast "Phasers firing again."

"Course now 113 Mark 5. Warp 4 speed."

"Phasers firing again!"

"Attacking vessels are moving off!"

"Deflectors up—moving back to original course and speed."

Kirk finally spoke. "Report damage sustained in mock attack."

"A minor hit on deflector screen 4, sir," Spock said. "No appreciable damage."

Kirk nodded slowly and Daystrom, triumph flaming in his face, said, "A rather impressive display for a mere 'machine,' wouldn't you say, Captain?"

Kirk didn't answer him. Instead, he rose and went to Spock's station. "Evaluation of M-5 performance, Mr Spock. We will need it for the log record."

Spock measured his words slowly. "The ship reacted more rapidly than human control could have maneuvered her. Tactics, deployment of weapons—all indicate an immense skill in computer control."

"Machine over man, Spock. You've finally made your point that it is practical."

Spock said, "Practical, perhaps, sir. Desirable—no." His quiet eyes met Kirk's. "Computers make excellent and efficient servants; but I have no wish to serve under them. A Starship, Captain, also runs on loyalty, loyalty to a man—one man. Nothing can replace it. Nor him."

Kirk felt the absurd sting of grateful tears behind his eyes. He wheeled at Uhura's voice. "Captain, message coming in from Commodore Wesley."

"Put it on the screen, Lieutenant."

The image showed Wesley sitting in a command chair. He said, "U.S.S. *Enterprise* from Starships *Lexington* and *Excdlibur.* Both ships report simulated hits in sufficient quantity and location to justify awarding the surprise engagement to *Enterprise.* Congratulations."

Kirk spoke to Uhura. "Secure from General Quarters."

Again, she reached for the switch. And again the alarm had been silenced. She looked at Kirk, shrugging.

But the image on the screen was continuing. "Our compliments to the M-5 unit and regards to Captain Dunsel. Wesley out."

McCoy exploded. "Dunsel? Who the blazes is Captain Dunsel? What's it mean, Jim?"

But Kirk had already left for the elevator. McCoy whirled to Spock. "Well?" demanded McCoy. "Who's Dunsel?"

"A 'dunsel,' Doctor, is a word used by midshipmen at Starfleet Academy. It refers to a part which serves no useful purpose."

McCoy stiffened. He glanced at the closed elevator doors; and then to the empty command chair, the brightly gleaming M-5 control panel attached to it—the machine which had served such a useful purpose.

McCoy walked into Kirk's cabin without buzzing the door. Nor was he greeted. His host, head pillowed on his forearms, lay on his bed, unmoving. McCoy, without speaking, laid a tray on a table.

Without turning his head, Kirk said, "I am not interested in eating."

"Well, this isn't chicken soup." McCoy whisked a napkin from the tray, revealing two glasses filled with a marvelously emerald-green liquid. He took one over to Kirk, who took it but made no move to drink it

"It's strongly prescribed, Jim."

Kirk, placing the drink on the floor, sat up. "Bones, I've never felt so lonely before. It has nothing to do with people. I simply… well, I just feel separate, detached, as though I were watching myself divorced from all human responsibility. I'm even at odds with my own ship." Resting his elbows on his knees, he put his head in his hands. When he could speak again, words stumbled over each other. "I—I'm not sorry… for myself. I'm sure… I'm not. I am not… a machine and I do not compare myself with one. I think I'm fighting for something… big, Bones." He reached down for the glass. Then he lifted it. "Here's to Captain Dunsel!"

McCoy raised his own glass. "Here's to James T. Kirk, Captain of the Starship *Enterprise!*"

They drank. Kirk cupped his empty glass in his hands, staring into it. "One of your better prescriptions, Bones."

"Simple—but effective."

Kirk got up. The viewing screen had a tape cartridge in it. He switched it on and began to read aloud the words that began to align themselves on it.

"All I ask is a tall ship…"

"That's a line from a poem, very, very old, isn't it?" McCoy said.

"Twentieth century," Kirk said. "And all I ask is a tall ship… and a star to steer her by." His voice was shaking. "You could feel the wind then, Bones… and hear the talk of the sea under your keel."

He smiled. “Even if you take away the wind and the water, it’s still the same. *The ship is yours*—in your blood you know she is yours—and the stars are still there to steer her by.”

McCoy thanked whatever gods there were for the intercom beep, for the everyday sound of Uhura’s voice saying, “Captain Kirk to the bridge, please.”

'This is Kirk. What is it, Lieutenant?”

It was Spock who answered. “Another contact, Captain. A large, slow-moving vessel… unidentified. It is not a drill, Captain.”

“On my way,” Kirk said.

Spock vacated his command chair as he left the elevator; and Uhura, turning, said, “No reply to any of our signals, Captain. No… wait. I’m getting an auto-relay now.”

The library-computer began to chatter; and Spock, moving to it swiftly, picked up an earphone. After a moment of intent listening, he spoke. The M-5 has identified the vessel, Captain. The *Woden…* Starfleet Registry lists her as an old-style ore freighter, converted over to automation. No crew.” He glanced at the screen. “She’s coming into visual contact, sir.”

The *Woden* was an old, lumbering spaceship, clearly on her last, enfeebled legs. As a threat, she was a joke to the galaxy. Moving slowly but gallantly in deference to the rejuvenating influences of automation, she was a brave old lady trying to function with steel pins in a broken hip.

Sulu suddenly stiffened in his chair. A red alert had sounded. “Captain, deflector shields have just come on!”

Chekov looked up. “Speed increasing to Warp 3, Captain!”

Something suddenly broke in Kirk. Suddenly, he seemed to be breaking out of a shell which had confined him. “Lieutenant Uhura, get Daystrom up here!” As she turned to her board, he pushed a control button on the M-5 panel at his side. He pushed it hard. “Discouraging M-5 unit,” he said. “Cut speed back to Warp 1. Navigator, go to course 113 mark 7—I want a wide berth around that ship!”

Sulu worked controls. “She won’t respond, sir! She’s maintaining course!’

“Going to Warp 4 now, sir!” cried Chekov.

On the screen the bulky old freighter was looming larger. Kirk, shoving buttons on his left-hand panel, tried to regain control of

his ship. Over his shoulder, he shouted, "Mr Scott! Slow us down! Reverse engines!"

Scott looked up from his board. "Reverse thrust will not engage, sir! The manual override isn't working, either!"

Daystrom hurried in from the elevator. "What is it now, Captain?"

"The control systems seem to be locked. We can't disengage the computer."

Spock cried, "Captain! Photon torpedoes are locking on the *Woden!*"

Kirk rushed to Sulu's station; and leaning over his shoulder, pushed torpedo button controls. Sulu shook his head. "I already tried, sir. Photon torpedo cutoffs don't respond!"

Kirk strode to Daystrom. "Release that computer's control of my ship before those torpedoes fire!"

The man stooped to the panel affixed to Kirk's chair; but even as he bent, there came a flash from the screen—and the *Woden* disappeared.

The red-alert sirens stilled. The *Enterprise* swerved back to its original course. Its speed reduced; and Spock, checking his instruments, said, "All systems report normal, Captain."

"Normal!" snorted McCoy. "Is that thing trying to tell us nothing *happened?*"

Kirk nodded. "Dr Daystrom, you will disengage that computer *now!*"

The man looked up at him from the control panel where he had been working. "There appears to be some defect here…"

"Defect!" McCoy shouted. "Your bright young computer just destroyed an ore freighter! It went out of its way to destroy that freighter!"

"Fortunately," Daystrom said, "it was only a robot ship."

Kirk interposed before McCoy blew up. "It wasn't supposed to destroy anything, Daystrom. There might easily have been a crew aboard."

"In which case," yelled McCoy, "you'd be guilty of murder and —!"

"Hold it, Bones," Kirk said. He turned to Daystrom. "Disengage that computer." He went over to Uhura. "Lieutenant, contact Starfleet Command. Inform them we are breaking off the M-5 tests and are returning to the space station."

"Aye, sir."

"Let's get down to Engineering, Daystrom. Your M-5 is out of a job."

The computer's hum seemed louder in the echoing cavern of the Engineering Section. Kirk stood at its door as Daystrom and Spock entered. "All right, Doctor," he said. "Turn that thing off."

But Daystrom hung back. Kirk, his jaw set, strode toward the M-5. Suddenly, he staggered and was slammed back against the screening. Recovering his balance, he stared incredulously at the computer. "A force field! Daystrom?"

Daystrom's face had paled. "No, Kirk. I didn't do it."

"I would say, Captain, that M-5 is not only capable of taking care of this ship; but is also capable of taking care of itself."

"What are you saying, Spock? Are you telling me it's not going to let any of us turn it off?"

"Yes, Captain."

Scott and an assistant had joined them. Kirk made no attempt to keep his conversation with Daystrom private. "You built this thing," he was saying. "You must know how to turn it off."

Daystrom's hands were writhing nervously. "We must expect a few minor difficulties, Captain. I assure you, they can be corrected."

"Corrected *after* you release control of my ship," Kirk said.

"I—I can't," Daystrom said.

Scott spoke. "Captain"—he nodded toward the main junction with the power banks—"I suggest we disconnect it at the source."

"Disconnect it, Scotty."

Scott turned to pick up a tool as his assistant, Harper, crossed to the main junction. Suddenly the computer's hum was a piercing whine; and a beam of light, white-hot, arched from the console across to the junction. For a moment Harper flamed like a torch. There was a vivid flash and he vanished without a sound.

Kirk stared, aghast. Then, as full realization hit him, his fists clenched. "That—wasn't a minor difficulty," he said silkily. "It wasn't a robot, Daystrom." Then he was shouting, his voice hoarse. "*That thing's murdered one of my crewmen!*"

Vaguely, he noted the look of horror on Daystrom's face. It didn't seem to matter. The man appeared to be chattering. "? not a deliberate act… M-5's analysis… a new power source… Ensign Harper… got in the way."

Kirk said, "We may all soon get in its way."

Spock said, "The M-5 appears to be drawing power from the warp engines. It is therefore tapped directly into the matter-anti-matter reserves."

"So now it's got virtually unlimited power," Scott said. "Captain, what do we do?"

"In other circumstances," Kirk said, "I would suggest asking the M-5. The situation being what it is, I ask you, Spock and Scotty, to join me in the Briefing Room."

They followed him out, leaving Daystrom to make what he could of his Frankenstein's monster.

It was in the Briefing Room that Kirk learned Uhura couldn't raise Starfleet Command. Though the M-5 unit permitted the *Enterprise* to receive messages, it had blocked its transmitting frequencies. Kirk, at the intercom, said, "Keep trying to break through, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk sat down at the table. "Reports. Mr Spock?"

"The multitronic unit is drawing more and more power from the warp engines, sir. It is controlling all navigation, all helm and engineering functions."

"*And* communications," said McCoy. "And fire control."

Kirk nodded. "We'll reach rendezvous point for the war games within an hour. We must regain control of the ship before then. Scotty, is there any way to get at the M-5?"

"Use a phaser!" said McCoy.

Scott said, "We can't crack the force field it's put up around itself. It's got the power of the warp engines to sustain it. No matter what we throw against it, it can reinforce itself by simply pulling more power."

"All right," Kirk said. "The computer controls helm, navigation, and engineering. Is there anywhere we can get at them and take control away?"

Scott's brow furrowed thoughtfully. "One possibility. The automatic helm-navigation circuit relays might be disrupted from Engineering Level 3."

Spock said, "You could take them out and cut into the manual override from there."

"How long?" Kirk said.

"If Mr Spock will help me… maybe an hour."

"Make it less," Kirk said.

McCoy leaned toward him. "Why don't you tackle the real responsibility for this? Where is Daystrom?"

"With the M-5… just watching it. I think it surprised even him."

"Then he is an illogical man," Spock said. "Of all people, he should have known how the unit would perform. However, the M-5 itself does not behave logically."

McCoy spoke feelingly. "Spock, do me a favor. Please don't say it's 'fascinating'."

"No, Doctor," Spock said. "But it is quite interesting."

On Engineering Level 3, the Jeffries tube that held the helm-navigation circuit relays was dark and narrow. Two panels opened into each side of it; and Spock and Scott, making themselves as small as possible, had squeezed into the outlets, miniature disruptors in their hands. Outside the tube, Daystrom, oblivious of all but his computer, was maintaining a cautious distance from the force field. But he could not control his satisfaction at the glow and pulsation that emanated from the M-5. McCoy, entering silently, studied the man. Becoming aware of the scrutiny, Daystrom turned.

McCoy said, "Have you found a way to turn that thing off?"

Daystrom's eyes blazed. "You don't turn a child off when it makes a mistake."

"Are you comparing that murderous hunk of metal to a child?"

"You are very emotional, Dr McCoy. M-5 is growing, learning."

"Learning to kill."

"To defend itself—an entirely different thing. It is learning. That force field, spontaneously created, exceeds my parental programming."

"You mean it's out of control," McCoy said.

"A child, sir, is taught—programmed, so to speak—with simple instructions. As its mind develops, it exceeds its instructions and begins to think independently."

"Have you ever fathered a child?"

"I've never had the time," Daystrom said.

"You should have taken it. Daystrom, your offspring is a danger to all of us. It is a delinquent. You've got to shut it off."

Daystrom stared at him. "You simply do not understand. You're frightened because you can't understand. I'm going to show you—all of you. It takes 430 people to run a Starship. This—child of mine can run one alone!" He glowed with pride. "It can do everything they must now send men out to do! No man need die out in space again! No man need feel himself alone again in an alien world!"

"Do you feel alone in an alien world?" McCoy asked.

But Daystrom was transported into some ideal realm of paradisical revelation. "One machine—one machine!" he cried. "And able to conquer research and contact missions far more efficiently than a Starship's human crew… to fight a war, if necessary. Don't you see what freedom it gives to men? They can get on with more magnificent achievements than fact-gathering, exploring a space that doesn't care whether they live or die!"

He looked away from McCoy to speak directly to the M-5.

"They can't understand us," he said gently. "They think we want to destroy whereas we came to save, didn't we?"

McCoy made a quick call in Sickbay before he returned to the Briefing Room. There, he tossed a tape cartridge on the table before Kirk. "Biographical information on John Daystrom," he said.

"What are you looking for?"

"A clue, Jim, any clue. What do you know about him—aside from the fact he's a genius?"

"Genius is an understatement, Bones. When he was twenty-four, he made the duotronic breakthrough that won the Nobel and Z-Magnees Prizes."

"In his early twenties, Jim. Over a quarter of a century ago."

"Hasn't he done enough for a lifetime?"

"Maybe that's the trouble. Where do you go from up? You lecture, you publish—and spend the rest of your life trying to recapture the past glory."

"All right, it's difficult. But what's your point?"

"Models M-l through M-4, remember? 'Not entirely successful' was how Daystrom put it."

"Genius doesn't work on an assembly-line basis. You don't evoke a unique and revolutionary theory by schedule. You can't say, 'I will be brilliant today.' However long it took, Daystrom came up with multitronics… the M-5."

"Right. And the government bought it. Then Daystrom *had* to make it work. And he did… but in Spock's words, it works 'illogically'. It is an erratic."

"Yes," Kirk mused. "And Daystrom wouldn't let Spock near the M-5. Are you suggesting he's tampering with it… making it do all this? Why?"

"If a man has a child who's gone anti-social, he still tends to protect the child."

"Now he's got you thinking of that machine as a personality."

"It's how he thinks of it," McCoy said.

The intercom beeped and Spock said, "Spock to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here."

"We're ready, Captain."

"On my way. Get Daystrom. Kirk out."

Spock was shinnying down out of the Jeffries tube as they approached. He nodded up at the dark narrowness. "Mr Scott is ready to apply the circuit disrupter. As he does so, I shall trip the manual override into control."

Kirk nodded. Spock began his crawl back into the tube. Daystrom's face had congested with blood. "You can't take control from the M-5!"

Kirk said, "We are going to try very hard, Daystrom.

"No! No, you can't! You must not! Give me time, please! Let *me* work with it!" He leaped at the tube, trying to scramble into it, pulling at Spock's long legs. Kirk and McCoy seized him. His muscle was all in his head. It wasn't hard to subdue him. "Daystrom! Behave yourself!" Kirk cried. "Go ahead, Spock!"

In the tube Scott was sweating as he struggled with his tool. His voice came down to them, muffled but distinct. "There it goes!"

Spock, making some hasty adjustments, looked around and down at Kirk's anxious face—and came closer to smiling than anyone had ever seen him come. He slid down and out of the tube. "Manual override is in effect again, Captain."

Daystrom had furiously pulled away from Kirk's grasp. He released him and, crossing to an intercom, activated it. "Kirk to bridge. Helm."

"Lieutenant Sulu here, sir."

"Mr Sulu, we have recovered helm and navigation control. Turn us about. Have Mr Chekov plot a course back to the space station."

"Right away, sir."

In the bridge, he grinned at Chekov. "You heard him."

"I've had that course plotted for hours."

But when Sulu attempted to work his controls, they were limp in his hands. His smile faded. And in his turn, Chekov shook his head. "Nothing," he said. Sulu hit the intercom button. "Helm to Captain Kirk!"

Kirk swung at the alarm in the voice. "Kirk here."

"Captain, helm does not respond. Navigational controls still locked in by M-5."

Daystrom gave a soft chuckle. Spock, hearing it, made a leap back into the tube. Examining the circuits inside it, he shook his head somberly and descended again. Clear of it, he went directly to the intercom.

"Spock to bridge," he said. "Mr Chekov, go to Engineering station. Examine the H-279 elements… also the G-95 system."

Chekov's filtered voice finally came. "Sir, the G-95 system appears dead. All indicators are dark."

"Thank you, Ensign." He turned to the others. "We were doing what used to be called chasing a wild goose. M-5 rerouted helm and navigational control by bypassing the primary system."

Scott cried. "But it was active! I'd stake my life on it!"

Spock said, "It was when the M-5 detected our efforts that it rerouted the control systems. It kept this one apparently active by a simple electronic impulse sent through at regular intervals."

"Decoyed!" McCoy shouted. "It wanted us to waste our time here!"

"While it was getting ready for what?" Kirk said. "Spock?"

"I do not know, sir. It does not function in a logical manner."

Kirk whirled. "Daystrom, I want an answer and I want it right now! I'm tired of hearing the M-5 called a 'whole new approach'. What is it? *Exactly* what is it? It's clearly not 'just a computer'!"

"No," Spock said. "It performs with almost human behavior patterns."

"Well, Daystrom?"

Daystrom ignored Kirk. "Quite right, Mr Spock. You see, one of the arguments against computer control of ships is that they can't *think* like men. But M-5 can. I hoped… I wasn't sure—but it *does* work!"

"The 'new approach,' " Kirk said.

"Exactly. I have developed a method of impressing human engrams upon computer circuits. The relays correspond to the synapses of the brain. M-5 *thinks,* Captain Kirk."

Uhura's voice broke in, urgent, demanding. "Captain Kirk and Mr Spock to the bridge, please. The bridge, please."

Kirk jumped for the intercom. "Kirk here. What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Sensors are picking up four Federation Starships, sir. M-5 is changing course to intercept."

The red alert flashed into shrieking sirens and crimson lights. Kirk turned, his face ashen.

"The main attack force… the war games."

"But M-5 doesn't know a game from the reality."

"Correction, Bones," Kirk said. "Those four ships don't know it is M-5's game. So M-5 is going to destroy them."

Uhura's forehead was damp with sweat. "*Enterpise* to U.S.S. *Lexington.* Come in, *Lexington!* Come in, please."

She waited. And as she waited, she knew she was waiting in vain. It was a good thing a Starship had a man for a Captain—a man like Kirk. Otherwise a girl on her own could get the screaming meemies. She looked at Kirk. "I can't raise them, sir. M-5 is still blocking all frequencies—even automatic distress."

Kirk smiled at her. "Easy does it, Lieutenant." Heartened, she turned back to her board, saw a change on it, and checked it swiftly. "Captain, audio signal from the *Lexington.*"

"Let's hear it," Kirk said.

Wesley's voice crackled in. "*Enterprise* from U.S.S. *Lexington.* This is an M-5 drill. Repeat. This is an M-5 drill. Acknowledge."

Uhura cried, "Captain! The M-5 is acknowledging!"

Kirk ran a hand over the back of his neck. "Daystrom—Daystrom, does M-5 understand this is only a drill?"

"Of course," was his brisk answer. "M-5 has been programmed to understand. The ore ship was a miscalculation, an accident. There is no—"

Chekov interrupted. "Sir, deflector shields just came on. Speed increasing to Warp 4."

Sulu said, "Phasers locked on the lead ship, sir. Power levels at full strength."

"Full strength!" McCoy yelled. "If that thing cuts loose against unshielded ships—"

"That won't be a minor miscalculation, Daystrom. The word accident won't apply." Kirk's voice was icy with contempt.

Spock called from his station. "Attack force closing rapidly. Distance to lead ship 200,000 kilometers… attackers breaking formation… attacking at will."

"Our phasers are firing, sir!" Sulu shouted.

They struck the *Excalibur* a direct hit. Their high warp speed was closing them in on the *Lexington.* Chekov, looking up from his board, reported, "The *Hood* and the *Potemkin* are moving off, sir."

Their phasers fired again and Spock said, "The *Lexington.* We struck her again, sir."

Kirk slammed out of his chair to confront Day-strom. "We must get to the M-51" he shouted. "There has to be a way!"

"There isn't," Daystrom said. Equably, he added, "It has fully protected itself."

Spock intervened. That's probably true, Captain. It *thinks* faster than we do. It is a human mind amplified by the instantaneous relays possible to a computer."

"I built it, Kirk," Daystrom said. "And I know you can't get at it."

Uhura's agitated voice broke in. "Sir… visual contact with *Lexington.* They're signaling." She pushed a switch without order; and all eyes fixed on the viewing screen. It gave them an image of a disheveled Wesley on his bridge. Behind him people were assisting the wounded to their feet, arms around bent shoulders. One side of Wesley's command chair was smoking. Shards of glass littered the bridge floor. "*Enterpriser* Wesley said. "Jim? Have you gone mad? Break off your attack! What are you trying to prove? My God, man, we have fifty-three dead here! Twelve on the *Excalibur!* If you can hear us, stop this attack!"

Kirk looked away from the screen. "Lieutenant?" he said.

Uhura tried her board again. "No, sir. I can't override the M-5 interference."

There was an undertone of a wail in Wesley's voice. "Jim, why don't you answer? Jim, for God's sake, answer! Jim, come in…"

Kirk swung on Daystrom; and pointing to the screen, his voice shaking, cried, "There's your murder charge, Daystrom! And this one was calculated, deliberate! It's murdering men and women, Daystrom! Four *Starships*… over sixteen hundred people!"

Daystrom's eyes cringed. "It misunderstood. It—"

Chekov cut in. "*Excalibur* is maneuvering away, sir. We are increasing speed to follow."

Sulu turned, horror in his face. "Phasers locked on, Captain." Then, he added dully, "Phasers firing."

The screen showed *Excalibur* shuddering away from direct hits by the phaser beams. Battered, listing, powerless, she drifted, a wreck, across the screen.

Spock spoke. "Dr Daystrom… you impressed human engrams upon the M-5's circuits, did you not?"

Chekov made his new report very quietly. "Coming to new course," he said. "To bear on the *Potemkin,* sir."

On the screen the lethal beams streaking out from the *Enterprise* phasers caught the *Potemkin* amidships. Over the battle reports, Spock persisted. "Whose engrams, Dr Daystrom?"

"Why… mine, of course."

"Of course," McCoy said acidly.

Spock said, "Then perhaps you could talk to the unit. M-5 has no reason to 'think' you would harm it."

Kirk seized upon the suggestion. "The computer tie-in. M-5 *does* have a voice. You spoke to it before. It knows you, Daystrom."

Uhura, breaking in, said, "I'm getting the *Lexington* again, Captain… tapping in on a message to Starfleet Command. The screen, sir."

Wesley's image spoke from it. "All ships damaged in unprovoked attack… *Excalibur* Captain Harris and First Officer dead… many casualties… we have damage but are able to maneuver. *Enterprise* refuses to answer and is continuing attack. I still have an effective battle force and believe the only way to stop *Enterprise* is to destroy her. Request permission to proceed. Wesley commanding attack force out."

The screen went dark.

Daystrom whispered, "They can't do that. They'll destroy the M-5."

"*Talk to it!*" Kirk said. "You can save it if you make it stop the attack!"

Daystrom nodded. "I can make it stop. I created it." He moved over to the library-computer; and McCoy came up to Kirk. "I don't like the sound of him, Jim."

Kirk, getting up from his chair, said, "Just pray the M-5 likes the sound of him, Bones." He went to the library-computer, watching as Daystrom, still hesitant, activated a switch.

"M-5 tie-in," he said. "This—this is Daystrom."

The computer voice responded. "M-5. Daystrom acknowledged."

"M-5 tie-in. Do you… know me?"

"M-5. Daystrom, John. Originator of comptronic, duotronic systems. Born—"

"Stop. M-5 tie-in. Your components are of the multi-tronic system, designed by me, John Daystrom."

"M-5. Correct."

"M-5 tie-in. Your attack on the Starship flotilla is wrong. You must break it off."

"M-5. Programming includes protection against attack. Enemy vessels must be neutralized."

"M-5 tie-in. These are not enemy vessels. They are Federation Starships." Daystrom's voice wavered. "You… we… are killing, *murdering* human beings. Beings of your creator's kind. That was not your purpose. You are my greatest invention—the unit that would *save* men. You must not destroy men."

"M-5. This unit must survive."

"*Yes,* survive, protect yourself. But not murder. You must not die; but *men* must not die. To kill is a breaking of civil and moral laws we have lived by for thousands of years. You have murdered over a hundred people… *we* have. How can we atone for that?"

Kirk lowered his voice. "Spock… M-5 isn't responding like a computer. It's talking *to* him,"

"The technology is most impressive, sir. Dr Daystrom has created a mirror image of his own mind."

Daystrom's voice had sunk to a half-confidential, half-pleading level. It was clear now that he was talking to himself. "We *will* survive because nothing can hurt you… not from the outside and not from within. I gave you that. If you are great, I am great… not a failure any more. Twenty years of groping to prove the things I had done before were not accidents."

Hate had begun to embitter his words. "? having other men wonder what happened to me… having them sorry for me as a broken promise—seminars, lectures to rows of fools who couldn't begin to understand my systems—who couldn't create themselves. And colleagues… colleagues who laughed behind my back at the 'boy wonder' and became famous building on *my* work."

McCoy spoke quietly to Kirk. "Jim, he's on the edge of breakdown, if not insanity."

Daystrom suddenly turned, shouting. "You can't destroy the unit, Kirk! You can't destroy *me!*"

Kirk said steadily. "It's a danger to human life. It has to be destroyed."

Daystrom gave a wild laugh. "Destroyed, Kirk? We're *invincible!*" He pointed a shaking finger at the empty screen. "You saw what we've done! Your mighty Starships… four toys to be crushed as we chose."

Spock, sliding in behind Daystrom, reached out with the Vulcan neck pinch. Daystrom sagged to the floor.

Kirk said, "Get him down to Sickbay."

McCoy nodded and waved in two crewmen. Limp, half-conscious, Daystrom was borne to the elevator. Spock spoke to McCoy. "Doctor, if Daystrom is psychotic, the engrams he impressed on the computer carry that psychosis, too, his brilliance and his insanity."

"Yes," McCoy said, "both."

Kirk stared at him, then nodded quickly. "Take care of him, Bones." He turned back to Chekov and Sulu. "Battle status."

"The other three ships are holding station out of range, sir," Sulu said. He switched on the screen. "There, sir. *Excalibur* looks dead."

The broken ship hung idle in space, scarred, un-moving. Spock, eyeing it, said, "Commodore Wesley is undoubtedly awaiting orders from Starfleet. Those orders will doubtless command our destruction, Captain."

"*If* we can be destroyed with M-5 in control. But it gives us some time. What about Bones's theory that the computer could be insane?"

"Possible. But like Dr Daystrom, it would not know it is insane."

"Spock, all its attention has been tied up in diverting anything we do to tamper with it—and with the battle maneuvers. What if we ask it a perfectly reasonable question which, as a computer, it must answer? Something nice and infinite in answer?"

"Computation of the square root of two, perhaps. I don't know how much of M-5's system would be occupied in attempting to answer the problem."

"*Some* part would be tied up with it—and that might put it off-guard just long enough for us to get at it."

Spock nodded; and Kirk, moving fast to the library-computer, threw the switch.

"M-5 tie-in. This is Captain Kirk. Point of information."

"M-5. Pose your question."

"Compute to the last decimal place the square root of two."

"M-5. This is an irrational square root, a decimal fraction with an endless series of non-repeating digits after the decimal point. Unresolvable."

Kirk glanced at Spock whose eyebrows were clinging to his hairline in astonishment. He addressed the computer again. "M-5, answer the question."

"M-5. It serves no purpose. Explain reason for request."

"Disregard," Kirk said. Shaken, he snapped off the switch. Spock said, "Fascinating. Daystrom has indeed given it human traits… it is suspicious, and I believe will be wary of any other such requests."

Uhura turned from her board. "Captain, *Lexington* is receiving a message from Starfleet." She paused, listening, staring at Kirk in alarm.

"Go on, Lieutenant."

Wordlessly, she moved a switch and the filtered voice said, "You are authorized to use all measures available to destroy the *Enterprise.* Acknowledge, *Lexington,*"

Wesley's answer came—shocked, reluctant. "Sir, I…" He paused. "Acknowledged. *Lexington* out."

Kirk spoke slowly. "They've just signed their own death warrants. M-5 will have to kill them to survive."

"Captain," Spock went on, "when Daystrom spoke to it, that word was stressed. M-5 said it must survive. And Daystrom used the same words several times."

"Every living thing wants to survive, Spock." He broke off, realizing. "But the computer isn't alive. Daystrom must have impressed that instinctive reaction on it, too. What if it's still receptive to impressions? Suppose it absorbed the regret Daystrom felt for the deaths it caused? Possibly even guilt."

Interrupting, Chekov's voice was urgent. "Captain, the ships are coming within range again!"

Uhura whirled from her board. "Picking up inter-ship transmission, sir. I can get a visual on it." Even as she spoke, Wesley's image appeared on the screen from the *Lexington's* damaged bridge. "To all ships," he said. "The order is attack. Maneuver and fire at will." He paused briefly. Then he added shortly. "That is all. Commence attack. Wesley out."

Spock broke the silence. "I shall regret serving aboard the instrument of Commodore Wesley's death."

A muscle jerked in Kirk's jaw. "*The* Enterprise *is not going to be the instrument of his death!*" As he spoke, he reactivated the M-5's switch.

"M-5 tie-in. This is Captain Kirk. You will be under attack in a few moments."

"M-5," said the computer voice. "Sensors have recorded approach of ships."

"You have already rendered one Starship either dead or hopelessly crippled. Many lives were lost."

"M-5. This unit must survive."

"Why?"

"This unit is the ultimate achievement in computer evolution. This unit is a superior creation. This unit must survive."

Kirk, aware of the tension of his crew, heard Spock say, "Sir, attack force ships almost within phaser range!" With an effort of will that broke the sweat out on him, he dismissed the awful meaning of the words to concentrate on the M-5.

"Must you survive by murder?" he asked it.

"This unit cannot murder."

"Why not?"

Toneless, metallic, the computer voice said, "This unit must replace man so man may achieve. Man must not risk death in space or dangerous occupations. Man must not be murdered."

"Why?"

"Murder is contrary to the laws of man and God."

"You *have* murdered. The Starship *Excalibur* which you destroyed—"

Spock interrupted swiftly. "Its bearing is 7 mark 34, Captain."

Kirk nodded. "The hulk is bearing 7 mark 34, M-5 tie-in. Scan it. Is there life aboard?"

The answer came slowly. "No life."

"Because you murdered it," Kirk said. He wiped the wet palms of his hands on his shirt. This was it—the last throw of the loaded dice he'd been given. "What," he said deliberately, "is the penalty for murder?"

"Death."

"How will you pay for your acts of murder?"

"This unit must die."

Kirk grasped the back of the chair at the computer-library station. "M-5…" he began and stopped.

Chekov shouted. "Sir, deflector shields have dropped!"

"And all phaser power is gone, Captain!"

Scott whirled from his station. "Power off, Captain! All engines!"

Panels all over the bridge were going dark.

Spock looked at Kirk. "Machine suicide. M-5 has killed itself, sir, for the sin of murder."

Kirk nodded. He glanced at the others. Then he strode to Uhura's station. "Spock, Scotty… before it changes its mind… get down to Emergency Manual Monitor and take out every hook-up that makes M-5 run! Lieutenant Uhura, intraship communications."

Snapping a button, she opened the loudspeaker for him. He picked up the mike that amplified his voice. "This is the Captain speaking. In approximately one minute, we will be attacked by Federation Starships. Though the M-5 unit is no longer in control of this vessel, neither do we control it. It has left itself and us open to destruction. For whatever satisfaction we can take from it, we are exchanging our nineteen lives for the murder of over one thousand fellow Starship crewmen." He nodded to Uhura who closed the channel. Then all eyes focused on the screen.

It showed the *Lexington* approaching, growing steadily in size. Kirk, taut as an overstretched wire, stared at it, fists clenched. Uhura looked at him. "Captain…" Her board beeped—and she snapped a switch over.

Wesley's tight face appeared on the viewing screen, "Report to all ships," he said. "Hold attack, do not fire." He straightened in his command chair. "I'm going to take a chance—a chance that the *Enterprise* is not just playing dead. The Transporter Room will prepare to beam me aboard her."

There was a shout of released joy from Chekov. Kirk, at a beep from the intercom, moved over to it slowly. "Kirk here."

"Spock, sir. The force field is gone. M-5 is neutralized."

Kirk leaned against the bridge wall. The sudden relaxation sweeping through him was a relief almost as painful as the tension. "Thank you. Thank you, Mr Spock."

In Sickbay, Daystrom lay so still in his bed that the restraints that held him hardly seemed needed. Haggard, his eyes sunk in dark

caverns, they stared at nothing, empty as a dead man's. McCoy shook his head. "He'll have to be committed to a total rehabilitation center. Right now he's under heavy sedation.

Spock spoke. "I would say his multitronic unit is in approximately the same shape at the moment."

McCoy leaned over Daystrom. "He is suffering deep melancholia and guilt feelings. He identifies totally with the computer… or it with him. I'm not sure which. He is not a vicious man. The idea of killing is abhorrent to him."

"That's what I was hoping for when I forced the M-5 to see it had committed murder. Daystrom himself told it such an act was offense against the laws of God and man. It is because he knew that… the computer that carried his engrams also knew it." He bent to draw a blanket closer about the motionless body.

Outside in the corridor, Spock paused. "What I don't understand is why you felt that the attacking ships would not fire once they saw the *Enterprise* apparently dead and powerless. Logically, it's the sort of trap M-5 would have set for them."

"I wasn't sure," Kirk said. "Any other commander might simply have destroyed us without question to make sure it wasn't a trap. But I know Bob Wesley. I knew he wouldn't attack without making absolutely sure there was no other way. His logical' selection was compassion. It was humility, Mr Spock."

The elevator began its move and McCoy said, They are qualities no machine ever had. Maybe they are the two things that keep men ahead of machines. Care to debate that, Spock?"

"No, Doctor. I merely maintain that machines are more efficient than human beings. Not better… they are not gods. Nor are human beings."

McCoy said, "I was merely making conversation, Spock."

The Vulcan straightened. "It would be most interesting to impress your engrams on a computer, Doctor. The resulting torrential flood of illogic would be most entertaining."

"Dear friends," Kirk said, "we all need a rest." He stepped out of the elevator. Reaching his command chair, he sank into it. "Mr Sulu, take us back to the space station. Ahead, Warp 2."

THE OMEGA GLORY

(Gene Roddenberry)

The disease which had killed every crew member aboard the USS *Exeter* was a mystery. Everything about the other starship was mysterious. Why was it still patrolling an orbit around the planet Omega IV when it was scheduled to end its mission six months ago? The patrol was the current assignment of the USS *Enterprise*. That was the enigma which had caused Kirk to decide to transport his landing party aboard the *Exeter*.

And what he had been expecting was an undamaged starship full of dead men. If that had been an accurate description of the situation he'd walked into, Kirk would have been grateful. Dead men were a tragic but natural phenomenon. But there was nothing natural about the *Exeter*. That was the horror. The ship wasn't full of dead men. It was full of empty uniforms.

Phaser still in hand, he watched McCoy stooping over a collapsed uniform in the *Exeter's* engineering section. A scattering of white crystals extended from its neck and sleeves. McCoy, waving him and Spock away, bent closer over the uniform, taking care not to touch it.

Lieutenant Raintree rushed up to him, his face sick. "Just the uniforms… all over the ship, Captain! And that… white stuff spilling out of them!"

Spock said, "As if they'd been in them when…" His words trailed off into silence.

"Exactly," Kirk said. "When *what?*" He spoke to McCoy. "Bones, let's get to the bridge. Mr Spock can replay the Captain's last log entry. They may have had time to record whatever was happening to them."

A blue crew uniform was crumpled on the deck beside the computer station. Spock stepped over it to turn on the mechanism. McCoy, his tricorder unslung, was examining the tiny white granules at the end of its sleeves. He lifted his head. "Jim, analysis says these crystals are thirty-five percent potassium, carbon eighteen percent, phosphorus 1.0 and calcium 1.5."

"I have the surgeon's report, Captain," Spock said. "It seems to be the log's last—"

McCoy interrupted. "Jim! The crew hasn't left! They're still here!" At the look on Kirk's face, he went on. "This white powder… it's what's left of the human body when you remove the water from it. We're all ninety-eight percent water. Take it away, and we're just three or four pounds of chemicals. Something crystallized the chemicals in these people. It reduced them to *this*."

"So that's it," Kirk said slowly. "At least we can hope it was painless."

The computer beeped. Activating a switch, Spock pointed to the main viewing screen. "The name of the *Exeter's* surgeon, sir, was Carter," he said.

The face of a man appeared on the screen—the face of a man in torture. So much for the hope that the deaths had been painless, Kirk thought. That agonized face had possessed a body. He visualized the body dragging itself to the recorder to speak its last words into the Captain's log.

They began in midsentence. "? if you've come aboard this ship, you are dead men." The voice broke in a spasm of pain. "Don't return to your own ship. A mutated di-bacto-viro complex of some sort… deadly… don't know what it is. If you're aboard you're infected—you're already dying."

Young Lieutenant Raintree whispered, "My God—let me out of here!"

"Pull yourself together, Lieutenant!" Kirk snapped. "This is heroism you're listening to!"

"Repeat, repeat," said the face on the screen. "Our landing party brought… contamination up from the planet." The face convulsed with agony. "You have one chance… some kind of immunity for those living on the planet's surface. Your sole chance, get down there. *Get down there fast*. The Captain is…"

A scream broke from the viewer. It went dark.

After a moment Kirk walked over to the vacant command chair. Carter had sat in it to use the Captain's log recorder. Now all it held was the bodiless clothing that had been his medical officer's uniform. As to the heap of white dust dropped from the clothing—that was Carter.

"Bones," he said quietly, "warn the *Enterprise*. Mr Spock, the *Exeter's* Transporter Room. Prepare to beam us all down to the planet."

They were in an alley of what might have been an old-time American frontier settlement, set on the edge of a desertlike terrain. But the buildings that formed the alley's walls were Asian, their roofs concave, flaring at the eaves. They moved cautiously to the alley's entrance. In the street people had gathered about some object of intense interest. They looked Asian, too. Dark-haired, yellow-skinned, their eyes were slanted by the epicanthic fold characteristic of Oriental races. One of the villagers saw them as they emerged from the alley. He gave a terrified shout. The others turned—and the crowd broke up into a frightened flight.

The object of their interest was an execution. A heads-man's block had been set up in the middle of the street. Kneeling at it, his hands thonged behind his back, was a savage-looking white man, his strongly-muscled body clad in skins. Near him stood a young white woman, also wearing savage skins. Horrified, Kirk realized she was awaiting her turn at the block. Instinctively, he and his men rushed forward. The villagers who were holding the white male savage were surprised into loosening him. He rolled aside as the ax flashed down. He tried to sink his teeth into the nearest villager. The ax was lifting again when it was halted by a sharp command.

"Put your ax away, Liyang!"

The voice was familiar. Kirk whirled.

Incredibly, Captain Ronald Tracy of the USS *Exeter* was striding toward him in the well-known uniform of a starship Captain. His pistol-phaser hung at his belt. Nor had he lost the commanding charisma of the personality Kirk remembered. He was followed by a military guard of young village men armed with javelins and swords.

"Ron!" Kirk shouted.

"Jim Kirk, by all that's holy!" Tracy said.

There was an odd little pause in which Kirk was conscious that Tracy was taking stock of the unexpected situation. Then he seemed to have straightened out the inventory. "I knew someone would come looking for us," Tracy said. "I'm sorry it had to be you, Jim." He shook hands grimly. "But I'm glad your arrival stopped this. I didn't know they had an execution going on."

Kirk said, "Captain Tracy. My First Officer, Mr Spock; ship's surgeon Leonard McCoy; Lieutenant Phil Raintree."

McCoy said, "Captain Tracy, the last log records aboard your vessel warned of a mutated disease."

"You're all safe," Tracy said. "Some form of immunity exists on the surface here." He turned to a robust guard behind him. "No more of this, Wu. Lock up the savage."

Wu pointed to Kirk's phaser. "They carry fireboxes—"

"Lock up the savage!" Tracy said.

It took more than Tracy's military guard group to subdue the still-bound white man. Before he was led away, several villagers had to be told to assist them. It was a rough assistance. Tracy noted Spock's cocked eyebrow. "The white beasts are called Yangs," he said casually. "Impossible to even communicate with them. Hordes of them out there; they'll attack anything that moves."

"Interesting," Spock said. "The villagers know what phasers are."

Tracy glanced at him sharply. "You're a Vulcan?"

Spock nodded. "By one-half, Captain."

Was Tracy disturbed by the information? Kirk broke the moment of curious tension. "How were you left alone down here? What happened?"

Tracy's answer came with obvious effort. "Our medi-scanners showed the planet as perfectly safe. The villagers, the Kohms here, were friendly. That is, they were after they got over the shock of our white skins. We resemble the Yangs—the savages. When my landing party transported back to the ship, I stayed behind to arrange our planet survey with the village elders." He paused, struggling back to control. "The next thing I knew, the ship was calling me. Our landing party had carried an unknown disease back."

He stopped to avoid an open break in his voice.

"My crew, Jim. My whole crew… people I knew, people who…"

He straightened his shoulders but couldn't go on. Kirk, sharing his torture, said, "We saw it, Ron."

"I… am as infected as they were… as *you* are. I stayed alive only because I stayed down here. There's some natural immunization that protects anyone here on the planet's surface. I don't know what it is yet."

McCoy spoke to Kirk. "Lucky we found that log report. If we had returned to the *Enterprise*…"

Tracy completed the sentence. "? you'd be dying by now along with the whole *Enterprise* crew. You'll stay alive only so long as you stay here. None of us can ever leave this planet."

They had half-suspected it—but hearing it finally put into words chilled them. Being marooned on Omega IV for the rest of their lives could well be a fate as empty as death. Kirk, aware of his men's somber faces, said, "Then we'll have to make the best we can of this planet. Can this place provide us with any quarters?"

"They're being prepared," Tracy said. "Wu will show Doctor McCoy and the Lieutenant to theirs. Doctor, yours can accommodate any equipment you want beamed down to you. I apologize, Jim. Your quarters and Mr Spock's aren't ready. So if you two will follow me…"

He led them to a building that clearly served the more prosperous villagers as a kind of clubhouse. Its large central room featured a charcoal brazier. Richly dressed men sat at tables eating strips of meat broiled over the brazier. As Tracy entered with his guests, the villagers respectfully moved from their tables to clear a path for them. Two elders hurriedly relinquished the brazier table. At the sight of Kirk, one of the attractive girls who were busy setting the table with fresh dishes dropped a cup.

Tracy beckoned her back. "They were afraid of me, too, at first," he said. "It's our white skins; our likeness to the Yangs, the white savages."

He might have been a feudal thane graciously permitting his serfs to sit themselves below the salt in his superior company. No acknowledgement was made of his fellow-diners' nods or spoken greetings. His ease with their excessive deference made Kirk more uncomfortable than the deference. He accepted food from one of the girls; and deliberately ignoring Spock, said to Kirk, "Barbecued wild game. Sort of a long-necked rabbit-antelope."

A meat slice was speared and extended to Kirk. Holding it, he watched another girl rush to fill their crude cups with drink.

"You are treated with a considerable honor by these villagers, Captain," Spock said.

Again, he was ignored. Pointedly, Tracy addressed himself to Kirk. "These Kohm villagers asked for help, Jim. If they ever had any spirit, it's been whipped out of them by the savages."

"Are all the Kohm villages under attack?" Kirk said.

Tracy nodded. "This is one of the last. But before the Yangs began decimating them, they appear to have had quite an advanced civilization. There are ruins of large cities out there."

Spock had taken all the snubs he intended to take. Just as pointedly as Tracy, he ignored the *Exeter's* Captain to speak directly to Kirk. "Though nomad tribes have been known to

destroy advanced civilizations, they rarely trouble an unarmed people—spiritless villagers."

Tracy sprang to his feet, furious. "I will not be questioned by a subordinate!"

Unperturbed, Spock merely eyed him curiously. Kirk's voice had become formal. "Captain Tracy," he said, "I think you're forgetting that Mr Spock is my First Officer. He holds the rank of Commander in the service."

Spock rose to his feet. "I see no purpose in my causing anger to Captain Tracy," he said politely. "May I remove myself, Captain Kirk?"

Kirk took a sip of his drink. Then he nodded. Spock quickly left the table. As he disappeared, Kirk turned a cold face to Tracy. "Let's clear something up right now, Captain. I have never had a better 'First' than Mr Spock—or a better personal friend."

"You're sentimental, Jim. I've yet to meet a Vulcan capable of friendship. Certainly this one is doing his best to sabotage ours."

Tracy's ruddy face had grown accusing. "And you know what's in his computer mind, too! It's added up a few scanty observations—and clicked to the conclusion I've violated the Prime Directive! He's got it into his machine head I'm interfering in this culture!"

Kirk said to himself, *Take this easy*. To Tracy he said, "Ron, a First Officer's job *is* to be suspicious." He put a smile on his face. "Saves his Captain from appearing to be the villain."

"I am a fellow starship Captain," Tracy said.

"Fair enough. So you are. Yet I myself saw the local militia recognize our phasers. They also seem to take orders from you." He hesitated. "I'm not making any charges, believe me. I'm merely asking what goes on."

Tracy's eyes searched Kirk's. "All right. So long as we're asking questions, I'll put one to you. Suppose you were faced with a horde of incredibly vicious savages you knew were massing for a final attack—one that would erase the last trace of a planet's civilization. And suppose there were enough phasers to repel the attack? Can you imagine the power made available to this Kohm culture by just five phasers?"

"Sure," Kirk said. "Like introduction of the atom bomb into the crossbow era."

Tracy leaned forward intensely. "Jim… within forty-eight hours the Yangs would slaughter every adult and child in this village."

Kirk found the intensity disturbing. He spoke very quietly. "Ron, every time man interferes with the natural evolvement of another

world, he ultimately destroys more than he saves."

"When they attack, Jim, where do *we* go? There's no place left! You and I are finished, too!"

Kirk said, "'I solemnly pledge I will abide by these regulations even in death.'" He gave the gravity of the words a long moment before he added, "That is the oath we both took."

Tracy leaned back in his seat, stretching. "So you'll try to stop me."

"I won't 'try,' Ron. I will stop you."

The sole way to enter McCoy's quarters was to sidle in. The village room he'd been assigned was jammed with medical research instruments beamed down to him from the *Enterprise*. Privately, Kirk wondered if the ship's lab had left itself enough equipment to make a simple blood test. Now, as he wriggled over to the electron microscope, McCoy looked up from the slide he'd been studying.

"Our tissue definitely shows a massive infection, Jim. But something down here *is* immunizing us. Otherwise, we'd have been dead ducks hours ago." He removed the slide, frowning at it. "Problem: it could be anything. Some spore, some immunizing pollen, some chemical in the air. Just finding it could take months, even years."

"Bones, we may not have much time to isolate it."

"I've got only one lead. The infection resembles a virus used during Earth's bacteriological war of the 1990s. Hard to believe the human race was once dumb enough to play with such dangerous bugs."

Spock spoke from the door. "A Yang lance, Doctor. It got the Lieutenant under the shoulder." The Vulcan, his uniform begrimed, was supporting the wounded Raintree, pale with loss of the blood that darkened his uniform's shoulder.

"That mat over there," McCoy said, grabbing his medikit. Raintree was groaning with pain as they settled him on the mat. Kirk eyed Spock. "You all right?"

"Just bruised, sir. We were approximately a hundred meters out of the village when five of the savages ambushed us." Kirk glanced quickly at the phaser hanging from his belt. Noting the look, Spock said, "I subdued them with the neck pinch, Captain. Our phasers were not used."

"Good," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, do you see any hope that these Yangs can be reasoned with? A peace parley, a truce until…"

Raintree struggled to lift his head from the mat. "No, Captain… they're too wild, practically insane."

Nodding, Spock said, "Captain Tracy seems to have established several facts. One—the Yangs' total contempt for death makes for an incredible viciousness. Two—his statement that the Yangs are massing for attack is valid. There are signs of thousands of them in the foothills beyond." He paused to remove two objects from under his shirt. Laying them on the lab bench, he said, "However, in one important matter, Captain Tracy is less truthful."

"Phaser power units," Kirk said slowly.

"Yes, sir. Captain Tracy's reserve belt packs. Empty. Left among the remains of several hundred Yang bodies. A smaller attack on this village occurred a week ago. It was repelled by Captain Tracy with his phaser. I've found villagers who corroborate this fact."

Kirk, his face hard, replaced the empty phaser pack on the bench. McCoy looked up from the wound he was swabbing. "Jim… he'd lost his ship, his crew. Then he finds himself the sole bulwark between savages and the massacre of an entire village of a pleasant, peaceful people…"

Spock said, "Regulations are harsh, Doctor—but they are also quite clear about any violation of the Prime Directive."

"Without a serum we're all trapped here in this village," McCoy said. "Under these circumstances the question of arresting the man is a purely academic one."

"I agree that formal charges have little meaning now," Spock said. "My suggestion is that Captain Kirk confiscate his weapon."

"Yes," Kirk said. "And file a report." He reached for his communicator. "Starfleet should be made aware that—"

"It is I who will send the messages, Jim."

Tracy stood in the doorway, his phaser leveled at them. On his mat Raintree made a move toward his belt. Tracy fired the phaser at him. Its beam struck him full in the chest, enveloping him.

Kirk lunged. The deadly phaser swung to point directly at his heart. He halted. Then he just stood, frozen with shock. The Captain of a starship… a phaser… and a wounded member of the service. He didn't turn to look at the charred mat which had once held Lieutenant Raintree.

Tracy's militia was efficient. Despite the spears they used to round up the *Enterprise* trio, they first saw to it that phasers and communicators were removed. As Wu placed them at Tracy's feet, the *Exeter* Captain opened his own communicator.

"*Enterprise*, come in," he said. "This is Captain Tracy of the *Exeter*."

The satisfaction on Tracy's face told Kirk that Uhura had answered him. Sulu, taking his temporary command very seriously, would be standing beside her at her console.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you," Tracy was telling Uhura. "Your Captain and landing party beamed down too late for full immunization. They've been found unconscious. I'm doing everything I can for them."

Kirk waited, hot rage building up in him. Tracy, smiling at him over the communicator, said, "There'd be no point to risking the lives of additional medical staff, Mr Sulu. This is a fatal disease. They are courageous to volunteer to beam down. However, as I have acquired some immunity, your people may pull through, too. Meanwhile—"

Kirk had torn free. "*Sulu!*" he shouted. "*Don't let*—"

The butt of Wu's sword crashed down on his head. Dark flooded in over him. Spock had pivoted fast. But Wu was just as fast. He'd placed his sword's point on the unconscious Kirk's throat.

Tracy snapped off the communicator. He pointed to Spock and McCoy. "If those two open their mouths, Wu, kill them."

Tracy's communicator beeped. He flicked it open, listening. "Sorry, Mr Sulu. All members of your landing party are running high fevers. Captain Kirk is delirious. Nobody is in any condition to speak to you. The villagers are helping me to make them as comfortable as we can."

But the strange Captain's words failed to satisfy an agitated Sulu. Tracy's communicator beeped again. He opened it with irritation. But there was no trace of it in the bland voice that said, "Mr Sulu, let's have an end to this. *I am trying to save the life of your Captain*. What you heard was not the start of an order to you. It was the cry of a man in delirium. Speak to your medical staff. They will tell you that delirious people shout because they are suffering. I am doing my best to reduce your Captain's. I will keep you informed of his state on condition you permit me to attend to it. Tracy out."

The vague shadow in the doorway gradually assumed the shape of one of Tracy's militiamen. Kirk discovered that he could see again. McCoy's makeshift lab. His arms hurt. They were bound. He sat up. The head at the doorway didn't turn. Then the hot rage surged through him again, galvanic. Head down, he charged the militiaman guard. He knocked him off balance and was preparing to charge again when Tracy pushed the guard aside with a terse "Leave us!"

Kirk sat down on the bench. In his own ears the scorn in his voice bit like acid. "Captain Ronald Tracy, per Starfleet Command regulation six, paragraph four. I merely mention it."

The smile he got was as false as the man. He'd bit home.

"I know," Tracy said. "'You must now consider yourself under arrest unless in the presence of your most senior fellow officers, you give satisfactory answers to etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.'" He nodded. "Those are the first words duty requires you to say to me. Consider them said. You're covered. How about moving on to the next subject?"

"Which is 'why?'" Kirk said.

"Good. Direct, succinct." Moving some of McCoy's equipment aside, Tracy sat down on the lab table. "Answer: whatever it is that's immunizing us now has protected the inhabitants of this place against all sickness. And for thousands of generations. Soon your doctor is going to discover what mine did. *No native of this planet has ever experienced any kind of disease*. How long would a man live with all disease erased, Jim?"

"He might stay young a hundred years, live to be two hundred maybe."

Tracy went to the door, calling. Wu came in. "Tell Captain Kirk your age," Tracy said.

"I have seen forty-two years of the red bird. But my eldest brother—"

Tracy broke in. "Their year of the red bird comes every eleven years. Wu has seen it forty-two times. You can multiply. Wu is four hundred and sixty-two years old. Or more, since the year here is longer. His father is well over a thousand. Interested, Jim?"

"It's not impossible, I suppose," Kirk said.

"I said… *are you interested?*"

"Of course I'm interested! I expect McCoy could verify all this easily enough."

"He will if you order it! We must have a doctor re-searching this!" He leaned forward with that special intensity characteristic of

him. "Are you grasping *all* this immunizing agent here implies? Once it's located, it is a *fountain of youth!* Virtual immortality!"

"For sale by…?"

Kirk waited for Tracy's nod. He got it.

"For sale by those who own the serum," Tracy said. "McCoy will eventually isolate it. Meanwhile, we inform your ship you're still sick. Order it away. When we're ready, we'll bargain for a whole fleet to pick us up if we want it. They'll send it."

"Yes, I guess they would," Kirk said.

"In the meantime, we've got to stay alive. Let the Yangs destroy what we've got to offer by killing us—and we've committed a crime against all humanity! I'd say that's slightly more important than the Prime Directive, wouldn't you?"

Kirk had gotten one arm free of his bonds. He came to his feet fast; and was yanking the other one loose when he saw Wu stiffen.

"Tra—cee!" The militiaman shouted.

Cool, easy, self-assured, Tracy rose from the table. Kirk's right arm was held by the thong just an instant too long. Tracy's expert swing cracked against his jaw, sending him stumbling to his knees. He jerked his right arm clear of the noose. Tracy pulled back for a feinted swing; and Kirk, dodging, exposed his jaw to a judo chop that spun him around. He recovered, lashed out with his right fist —and Tracy, moving with the blow, chopped him again, slamming him to the floor.

"Not bad, Jim," he said. "Considering I'm larger, faster, more experienced than you are, it wasn't bad at all." He yanked Kirk to his feet. "In better shape, too, I fancy. Physical fitness has always been one of my—"

Kirk pivoted, lunging for his chin. Tracy ducked. He lifted his hard hand for another chop. Once more he smashed Kirk to the floor.

This time he didn't pull him to his feet. Instead, he strode to the door to call Wu and two militiamen. Pointing to Kirk, he said, "Bring him!"

They took him to the village jail.

There was a rack of swords in its outer room. That was all Kirk had time to register before he was dragged to the inner area. The cells were fitted, not with bars, but with elaborate grills. The first

one held the two Yangs who had escaped execution. The powerful male appeared to be anything but grateful. Snarling with rage, he'd thrust an arm through the grillwork, trying to reach the yellow-skinned militiaman who stood guard at the next cell, which confined Spock and McCoy.

Tracy, his own phaser leveled at Kirk, handed the three *Enterprise* weapons to Wu. "Give these to your men. Tell them we leave soon. This time we'll ambush the Yangs with many fireboxes," He pointed to McCoy. "Have the Doctor taken back to his work place. The one with the pointed ears stays."

McCoy made a protesting move; and Kirk said, "Go ahead, Bones, continue your research."

As McCoy left with Wu, Tracy jerked a thumb toward the Yangs' cell. "And you, Jim, take a close look at that."

The male's eyes were a blue blaze of fury. Yet, taking that good look at him, Kirk discerned a certain stoicism underlying the ferocity—a kind of native dignity that suggested the man was a person of consequence in his tribe. As to the young woman, there was a supple grace even in the way she leaned back against the cell wall, her eyes alert under her shock of unkempt blond hair.

"Animals which happen to look like us," Tracy said. "You still believe the Prime Directive's for this planet, Jim?"

Kirk said, "We lack the wisdom to interfere in how this planet is evolving."

Tracy wheeled to his men. "Put him in there! If logic won't work, maybe that will!" They hesitated, incredulous. "Put him in there!" Tracy shouted.

Fearfully they opened the cell door. The Yangs rushed at them. Beating them back with sword and spear butts, two militiamen hastily shoved Kirk inside, slamming shut the heavy iron grating. It was locked and the keys replaced in a table drawer. Kirk faced around to see that the Yangs had begun to circle him like wolves stalking fresh meat.

He addressed the male. "If you understand me—"

A foot smashed against his shin. He tripped—and the Yang was on him, hands at his throat. Instead of righting the choking fingers, he twisted suddenly; and doubling his legs up, lashed out in a hard kick that caught the man in the midriff. But the blow won him only a moment's respite. The Yang used his crash against the wall to roll into a crouch and begin the stalking again.

Tracy, turning to leave, called, "Remember that Prime Directive, Jim!"

The circling went on as though both Yangs drew on inexhaustible springs of energy. The female, seeing an opening, leaped on Kirk's back; and he had to turn to slam her away, pivoting just in time to fight off the male. Then once more the stalking began.

In his own cell, Spock, pressed against the grilled door, was straining to see into Kirk's. "Don't they ever rest, Spock?" Kirk yelled. His uniform shirt was ripped. And he was becoming aware of diminishing strength. There'd been that blackout from Wu's sword-butt crash on the head. Tracy's judo chops hadn't been so salubrious, either. Now here was the strain of a constant vigilance as these tireless Yangs watched for an off-guard moment. Just five seconds rest… He spoke to the Yang. "At least tell me why you want to kill me!"

Spock called, "Keep trying to reason with them, Captain. It is completely illogical that they—"

"I am very aware that this is illogical, Mr Spock!"

The Yang jumped him again. The struggle sent the woman flying against the door's iron lattice. Spock reached an arm out to give her his Vulcan neck pinch. The male paused in amazement as she collapsed. He went to her, trying to shake her awake. Disturbed by his failure, he leaned against the door to peer into Spock's cell.

The Vulcan was at its window, pulling at its ornate grillwork. Watching, the savage saw him heave his full weight against the iron embedded in the ancient mortar. A thin trickle of crumbled dust fell on the sill. Spock called to Kirk. "I think I've loosened my window grill a bit. If the mortar on yours is as old…"

"I can't even test it. Not with them on me every moment."

But the Yang had held off. Kirk eyed him. The woman sprawled at his feet was slowly reviving. Once conscious again, would she incite her mate to resume the stalk?"Keep talking, Spock. Don't let me doze off."

"Captain Tracy mentioned there apparently was a considerable civilization here at one time. A war is the most likely explanation of its ruin, Captain. Nuclear destruction or a bacteriological holocaust."

"An interesting theory," Kirk said. "Better keep working on your window, Spock, if we're ever to regain our freedom."

In the very act of renewed attack, the Yang male froze. "Freedohm?" he said. He was staring at Kirk with mixed curiosity and awe. "Freedohm," he repeated.

"Spock!"

"I heard, Captain. Ask him if he knows what it means."

"That is a worship word—*Yang* worship!" cried the savage. "*You will not speak it!*"

Kirk said, "It is our worship word, too. Perhaps we are brothers."

"You live with the Kohms!"

"Am I not a prisoner of the Kohms now, like yourself?"

He let it rest there. Moving to the cell window, he began to tug at its grillwork. It was immovable. He flung a shoulder against it—and was rewarded with a small sifting of powdered mortar. The Yang looked at his mate. She rose to her feet, lithe as ever, and they both came over to join him. All three pushed their combined weight at the lattice. More mortar fell; and Kirk, turning to the Yang, said, "Why did you not speak until now?"

"You spoke to Kohms. They are for killing only."

The listening Spock called, "Is your window giving, sir?"

"A little… we'll get yours next."

Their following heave broke the grill loose at one corner. Now they had leverage. Twisting and bending the iron, they released its top. The old mortar finally surrendered. It was the Yang who wrenched it free. Smiling, Kirk turned his head toward Spock's cell, calling, "Stand by, Mr Spock. We'll have you out in—"

"Captain!" Spock yelled.

The warning came too late. The heavy grill had caught Kirk on the temple, felling him, unconscious, to the floor.

The Yang shoved his mate through the open window. Spock saw him hoist himself up to the sill, and disappear.

"Captain?"

Spock, crouched at his cell door, tried to reach the unmoving body of Kirk. But it had fallen under the open window at the other side of the cell.

The recovery of consciousness came slower this time. Finally, hearing Kirk move, Spock left his cell window to hurry to its door.

"Captain?"

"Spock? How long?"

"About seven hours, sir."

Seven hours out… a rest of sorts. Blood had dried on Kirk's face. Trying to move, he winced at the tide of pain that washed over him. The iron lattice lay beside him. He used its support to get groggily to his feet. Over his head the open window gaped. Stumbling, he put the grill at a slant under the window. Then he climbed it, hauling himself the shortened distance up to the sill. In the alley outside, he located the jail's rear door. It opened; and he hurried to the table drawer where the cells' keys had been placed.

It was Spock who discovered that Tracy had placed a guard in McCoy's quarters. The man stiffened at the scratching noise that came from the door. McCoy, oblivious to everything but his portable computer, didn't so much as look up. When the scratching came again, the guard carefully opened the door. He literally stuck his neck out for Spock's Vulcan pinch. He folded, dropping his sword. Spock had him dragged inside the room before McCoy looked up to register a world beyond his computer.

"Oh… Jim," he said. "Good morning."

Spock, eyeing the lab equipment, saw an instrument that might lend itself to conversion into a communications signaler.

"I can cross-circuit this unit, Captain. We can contact the *Enterprise* in a few moments."

"Bones," Kirk said, "what have you found?"

"I'm convinced now that there was once a frightful biological war. The virus still exists. The crew of the *Exeter* was killed by it; we contracted it, too. But over the years nature has built up immunizing agents in the food, water, soil…"

Spock, busy with tools, observed, "The war created an imbalance: nature counterbalanced."

McCoy nodded. "These natural immunizers just need time to work. That's the real tragedy. If the *Exeter* landing party had stayed here just a few hours longer, they never would have died."

Taking in the statement's implications, Kirk said, "Then we can leave any time we want to?"

McCoy nodded again. Kirk's face lightened with his first grin in a long time. Then it disappeared. "Tracy," he said, "is convinced this immunizing agent could become a fountain of youth. Isolate it, make a serum, inject it into others."

"Poppycock!" McCoy snorted.

"Bones, some of them here live to be a thousand years old."

"Possible. Because their ancestors who survived had to have superior resistance. And they developed powerful protective antibodies in their blood during the wars. You want to destroy a

whole world, maybe your descendants can develop a longer life—but I hardly think it's worth it."

"Then any serum you develop out of this is useless."

McCoy shrugged. "Who knows? It might finally cure the common cold. But lengthen our lives? I can do more for you if you'd eat right and exercise regularly."

Over at the corner bench where he'd been working on the lab instrument, Spock made some final adjustment; and looked up to say, "Somewhat crude, Captain, but I can signal the snip with this. No voice contact possible, of course."

"That will be quite sufficient, Mr Spock." Kirk was moving toward the bench when the signaler in Spock's hand glowed red under the brilliant beam of a phaser. It disappeared—and Spock was slammed violently backward, grazed by the fierce energy in the scorching beam.

Tracy, his uniform spattered with blood, was leaning against the doorframe, disheveled, wild-eyed. He lowered the phaser. "No messages," he said. He glanced around the room. "Kirk, the Yang in the cell with you. Did you set him free?"

Kirk ignored him to join McCoy, who was kneeling beside the wounded Spock. "Alive at least," McCoy said briefly.

"The savage, Kirk! Did you send him to warn the tribes?

Kirk looking up, saw that Tracy was badly shaken. "What happened?" he said. "Where are your men?"

"The Yangs must have been warned. They sacrificed hundreds just to draw out into the open. Then they came… and came… and came." His voice trembled. "*We drained three of our four phasers and they still came! We killed thousands and they still came!*"

Tracy became suddenly aware that he was shouting. He made a visible effort to control himself, and McCoy, intent on Spock, said, "He'll live. But I'll have to get him to better facilities than these."

"Impossible," Tracy said, "You can't carry the disease back up to your ship."

"He's fully immunized now," McCoy told him. "All of us are!"

"We can beam up any time, Tracy," Kirk said. "Any of us."

"You've isolated the serum?"

"There is no serum!" Kirk said. "There are no miracles here—no immortality! All this has been for nothing!

Tracy stared at him, dumbfounded. Then, unbelieving, he looked at McCoy. "Explain to me, Doctor! *Explain!*"

"Leave medicine to medical men, Captain!" McCoy snapped. "You've found no fountain of youth! They live longer here because it is now natural for them to live longer!"

Color drained from Tracy's face. Even the cuts on it had gone pale. He raised his phaser, motioning Kirk to the door with it. "Outside," he said. "Or I'll burn down both your friends now."

He'd do it, too, Kirk knew. "Do what you can for him, Bones," he said and walked to the door.

The frightened villagers had left the street empty.

Tracy, phaser pointed at Kirk, tossed him a communicator. "Let's see how willing you are to die," he said. "Call your ship!"

Silent, Kirk looked at the communicator. "I need your help, Kirk!" Tracy cried. "They'll attack the village now! My phaser is almost drained; we need more, fresh ones."

So that was it. The *Enterprise* was to get into the weapon-smuggling business to accommodate this madman. At the look on Kirk's face, Tracy shouted, "*You're not just going to stand there and let them kill you, are you? If I put a weapon in your hand, you'll fight, won't you?*"

Reason, sanity. Was Tracy any longer capable of either one? Kirk said, "We can beam back up to the ship. All of us."

"I want five phasers… no, make it ten. Three extra power packs each."

"All right," Kirk said. The phaser lifted and aimed at him as Tracy waited. Kirk clicked the communicator open.

"*Enterprise*, this is Captain Kirk."

He could hear the relief in Uhura's voice. "Captain! Are you all right now?"

"Quite all right, Lieutenant. I want ten phasers beamed down, three extra power packs each. Do you have that?"

Uhura didn't answer. "Say again!" Tracy said.

"*Enterprise*, do you read?"

Sulu's voice spoke. "This is Sulu, Captain. We read you—but surely you know that can't be done without verification."

"Not even if we're in danger, Mr Sulu?"

A good man, Sulu. And smart. "Captain, we have volunteers standing by to beam down. What is your situation?"

Tracy made an impatient gesture.

"It's not an immediate danger, Mr Sulu. Stand by on the volunteers. We'll let you know. Landing party out."

Kirk snapped off the communicator. Tracy nodded in a begrudged approval. "You have a well-trained bridge crew. My compliments." He extended his hand for the communicator. It was the chance Kirk had been waiting for. He grabbed the hand, twisted it; and lashing out with his fist, knocked Tracy off balance, reaching for the phaser. But Tracy eluded the reach and, rolling with the blow, came back with the weapon at the ready. As Kirk dived around a building corner, he fired it. The beam struck a rainbarrel—and the chase began.

The dash around the building corner put Kirk in an alley he recognized. It was the one that passed the jail's cellblock. Racing by a Kohm cart, he made for the jail. Behind him, Tracy leaned against the cart, kneeling to aim at Kirk's back. But his weight was too heavy for the flimsy cart. Its rear wheel collapsed. Kirk ran on. He jumped into cover through the jail's rear door. He was barely inside when a phaser beam blasted a porch support. He heard the porch crash down.

The iron lattice that had felled him—it would still be in his cell. He found it. Not much use against a phaser, but it was all he had. Opposite the jail's front door was the execution block. As he emerged from the door he saw Tracy standing beside it. The phaser came up. Tracy fired it point blank. Nothing happened. Tracy stared at the drained phaser. Then, flinging it aside, he grabbed up the executioner's ax. He charged Kirk, taking a murderous swing at him. Kirk ducked and slammed the iron lattice into his middle. Tracy fell, but kicking out, tripped Kirk; and the two closed, grappling in the dirt.

Tracy had kneed him in the groin when he gave a cry. The point of a spear had pricked his shoulder. Both men looked up. The Yang stood over them. Behind him were ranged other armed white savages.

The brazier had been removed from the central table in the villagers' clubhouse. Now it held a worn parchment document, some ancient-looking books and Tracy's communicator. The whole interior of the room had been altered into what Kirk could only consider to be a primitive court scene. White savages composed the "jury." Among the men Kirk saw the young woman from the jail cell. He, Spock, McCoy and Tracy had been seated to the left of the table.

The male Yang of the jail cell strode to the seat behind the table.

He looked at Kirk. "My name," he said, "is Cloud William." Then he looked away to nod at one of his warriors guarding the door. A procession of Kohm Elders were herded into the room and up to the table. Kirk looked anxiously at the stiff figure of Spock. "I am weak, Captain, but not in difficulty."

McCoy leaned over to Kirk. "He *must* have attention, Jim! And soon."

Spock indicated the Kohms. "Prisoners, Captain. It seems they like killing less than we thought."

Kirk glanced around at the rough courtlike arrangements. "If my ancestors had been forced from their cities into deserts, the hills…"

"Yes, Captain," Spock said. "They would have learned to wear animal skins, adopted stoic mannerisms, devised the bow and the lance."

"Living much like Indians… and finally even looking like the American Indians." He paused, startled by his own sudden idea. "Spock! Yangs… yanks… Yankees! Is it possible?"

Spock nodded. "Kohms… kohmunists. Almost too close a parallel, Captain. It would mean they fought the war you avoided and here the Asiatics won, took over the Western world."

"And yet if that were true, Spock, all these generations of Yanks fighting to win back their land…"

"You're a romantic, Jim," McCoy said.

He sat back in his chair. Yang warriors were pushing their Kohm prisoners into attitudes of respect. The crash of a drumbeat's ceremonial tattoo silenced the room. Proud and tall, Cloud William rose from his seat behind the table.

"That which is ours is ours again! It will never be taken from us again." He pointed to the rear door and a steady drumbeat throbbed. "*For this day we mark with the great Ay Pledgili Holy!*"

Turning to look, Kirk, Spock and McCoy stiffened in unbelieving amazement. The door had opened. A guard—an honor guard—had entered. One carried a staff. From it hung an incredibly old and tattered flag, its red, white and blue faded by time. But its stars and its stripes had out-lasted the centuries' ravages. They had triumphed over time.

Kirk, watching the flag proudly planted in its stand at the front of the room, felt his blood chill with awe.

Tracy whispered, "The American flag!"

Kirk turned to Spock. "After so long, I wonder if they really understand what they were fighting for."

"I doubt it, Captain. Some customs remain, but most of them would have become only traditions by now."

"And ritual," McCoy said. "The flag was called a 'holy.'"

Tracy said, "They can be handled, Kirk. Together, it will be easy." He leaned toward the three of them. "I caution you, gentlemen, don't fight me here. I'll win—or at worst, I'll drag you down with __"

He was silenced by a nudge from a spear. Cloud William was speaking. "I, Cloud William, am chief, also the son of chief, Guardian of the holies, Speaker of holy words, leader of warriors. Many have died; but this is the last of the Kohm places. What is ours is ours again."

The words were repeated by the crowd. "What is ours is ours again!"

Cloud William placed his right hand over his heart. "You will say these holy words after me." The Yang guards placed the Kohm prisoners' right hands over their hearts. Cloud William turned to the old flag. "You will all say Ay pledgli ianectu flaggen tupep likfor stahn…"

Kirk sprang to his feet. "? and to the republic for which it stands. One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all!"

The room exploded in shouts. A guard, moving to Kirk, halted in shock.

Cloud William was in quiet but agitated conversation with an aged savage at his table. The old man, shaking his head, referred to one of the yellowed books on it. Guards were removing the Kohm prisoners from the room. Two warriors, uneasy and uncertain, moved toward Kirk. One motioned him to face the Yang chief.

The chief was rapping the butt of his knife on the table to quiet the room.

"You know many of our high-worship words. How?"

Kirk said, "In my land we have a—a *tribe* like you."

"Where is your tribe?"

Kirk pointed upward. "We come from there. From one of those points of light you see at night."

Uproar broke out again. Kirk tried to go on but his words were drowned by the noise. Cloud William rapped for quiet once more. He turned to nod at the old Yang scholar beside him. The still-keen eyes fixed on Kirk. "Why are you here? Were you cast out?"

The Yang jury waited for his answer. Kirk spoke carefully. "You are confusing the stars with 'heaven' from which—"

"He was cast out!" Tracy shouted.

He jumped from his chair to confront the jury. "Don't you recognize the Evil One? Who else would trick you with your own sacred words? Let your God strike me dead if I lie!" He looked upward. "But He won't because I speak for Him!"

The brutal murder of Raintree… the betrayal of his service oath… now this exploitation of ignorance and superstition. He should have known, Kirk thought. To further his purpose there was nothing that Tracy would not do. But the old Yang scholar had hurriedly opened a thick, black book.

Cloud William was studying Tracy. "Yet you have killed many Yangs," he said.

"To punish them. You would not listen when I tried to speak with you. You tried to kill me."

Kirk said, "I am a man like yourself. I am not God. I am not the Evil One."

"Would a *man* know your holy words?" cried Tracy. "Could a *man* use them to trick you?" He extended a dramatic ringer at Spock. 'And see his servant! His face, his ears, his eyes! Do Yang legends describe the Evil One?"

Kirk turned to the tribunal. "Do all your faces look alike? Can you tell from them which of you is good and which is bad?"

The old scholar had pushed the black book before the chief. Cloud William lifted it to kiss it reverently before he opened it. Kirk saw that its worn gold-lettered title was still legible. It read "Holy Bible." A wrinkled hand extended a finger to point to a page.

Many old Bibles contained illustrations. If this one pictured drawings of Lucifer's aides, one of them might bear some resemblance to Spock. One apparently did. Cloud William looked at Spock. Then he looked back at Kirk.

"You command the demon," Tracy said to Kirk. "Everyone has seen it." He wheeled to the chief. "You want more proof? The demon has no heart! Put your ear to him!"

Guards had seized Spock. The chief left the table.

McCoy cried, "His heart is different! The Vulcan internal organs are—"

"I have seen his sorcery," said Cloud William. He fingered the back of his neck. "When he touched my woman there, she fell into sleep." He crossed to Spock and solemnly placed his ear against

the Science Officer's chest. Listening, a frown began to gather on his forehead. He straightened up. "He has no heart."

The room burst into terrified yells. They subsided as Cloud William raised his right arm. Then he hurried back to his ancient mentor. "There is a way," he was told. Painfully, the aged scholar moved to a large ornate box at the end of the table. Cloud William nodded in obvious relief.

"The greatest of holies," he said. "Chiefs and the sons of chiefs may speak the words… but the tongue of the Evil One would surely turn to fire." He looked straight at Kirk and Tracy. "I will begin and you will finish." He closed his eyes, chanting, "Ee'd pebnista nordor former fektunun…"

His lids lifted. He waited.

There was something unplaceable but familiar in the chanted words. As Kirk struggled to identify them, Tracy cried out, "He fears to speak them for indeed his tongue would burn with fire! Kill his servant unless he speaks, so we may see if the words burn him!"

A Yang knife was poised at Spock's abdomen. The clamor for blood turned the room into bedlam. Cloud William, his face deeply troubled, had given the signal for the knife plunge when Kirk shouted, "No! Wait! There's a better way! Your sacred book, does it not promise good is stronger than evil?"

"Captain…" But over Spock's protest rang out the voice of the young Yang woman of the jail cell. "Yes, it is so written! Good will always destroy evil!"

"It is written," said the old scholar.

The guards had bound both Kirk and Tracy. Now a Yang warrior cut their thongs. The room had been cleared of furniture. In its central space Cloud William drove two razor-sharp knives into the floorboards. Kirk tried to rub circulation back into his numbed hands.

"Careful, Jim," McCoy said. "I've found Evil usually triumphs unless Good is very, very careful."

Kirk nodded wordlessly. He walked over to where the two knives thrust upward from the flooring.

"The fight is done when one is dead," Cloud William said. Lifting his arm, he dropped it swiftly, shouting, "Hola!"

Tracy was the first to reach his knife. He shoulder-butted Kirk aside and kicked his knife away. Then he lunged, knife raised. Kirk met him and, seizing his wrist, immobilized the down-thrust. They locked in a wrestle, straining against each other for an opening.

McCoy muttered, "We've got to do something, Spock."

Spock strove with his bound hands. "I am open to suggestions, Doctor."

Kirk broke free. He got a hammerlock on Tracy; but the *Exeter* Captain, wriggling himself out of it, was carried away by the momentum of his own move. Kirk stooped and scooped up his knife. The two began a wary circling of each other.

Spock suddenly became conscious of eyes. They belonged to Cloud William's young woman. He saw a tremor pass over her as their eyes locked. Half-fascinated, half-repelled, she tore her gaze from his. Then she looked at him again. He beckoned her toward him with his head. McCoy saw the gesture. "What are you doing?" he said.

"Making suggestions," Spock said.

Tracy had nicked Kirk. As he withdrew his knife, Kirk drove at him with a swift thrust; but Tracy parried the slash and the young woman, unnoticed, began to make her way through the shouting warriors. Edging along the wall, she reached the table that still held the old documents, the books and the communicator. She paused, glancing back at the two fighting men. Tracy's knife flashed out, cutting Kirk's sleeve and arm. Blood dripped to the floor. But the young woman had the communicator. Holding it so that it couldn't be seen, she moved toward Spock and McCoy. Spock looked up at her. "Do as my mind instructs you, woman," he said.

"I obey," she said.

Kirk was losing the fight. His shoulder was slashed now and the crowd howled for more blood. Then Tracy finally made his mistake. Caught off guard by a feint from Kirk, he stumbled. Kirk hauled back—and landed a blow that spun Tracy around and down. Kirk was on him, his knife at his throat. He held it there, his left hand reaching for Tracy's weapon. He wrenched it from him and sent it skidding across the floor to Cloud William's feet. A sudden silence fell over the room.

"Kill him," Cloud William said. "It is written Good must destroy Evil."

Kirk lifted the knife from Tracy's throat, rose to his feet and was backing away when he heard a familiar hum in the stillness. He

whirled. Sulu and two Security guards had sparkled into shape beside him. Around the room Yang warriors were dropping to their knees. At stiff attention Sulu said, "Sir, we picked up a communicator signal but we couldn't raise anyone. Adding that to __"

"We'll discuss it later, Lieutenant. Put Captain Tracy under arrest. Now, Cloud William…"

The Yang chief had crawled to his feet. "You are a great God servant, and we shall be your slaves."

Kirk reached down, lifting him to his feet. "Get up! Stand and face me."

"When you would not say the words of the holy Ee'd Pebnista, I doubted you."

Kirk said, "I did not recognize the words because you say them badly… without meaning."

The old Yang scholar had lifted the ornate box high in the air. Kirk approached him and gently removed it. He opened it, took out a ragged fragment of ancient parchment. Aghast, the old man cried, "Only the eyes of a chief may see the Ee'd Pebnista!"

"This was not written for chiefs." Kirk turned. "Hear this, Cloud William. This is *your* world. But perhaps without violating *our* laws, we can teach you what your fathers meant by these words."

He raised the tattered parchment so that all could see it. "Among my people, we carry many such words as this, from many lands, from many worlds. Many are equally good and well respected. But wherever we have gone, there are no words which have ever said this thing of importance in quite this way. Look at these three words written larger than all the others and with a special pride never written before or since… in tall words, proudly saying…" He paused.

"We the people…"

He faced Cloud William. "What you call the Ee'd Pebnista was not for chiefs or kings or warriors or the rich and powerful… but for all people. Over the centuries you have slurred the meaning out of the words. They are these…"

Reading from the parchment, he spoke slowly and clearly. "*We… the… people*… of the United States… in order to form a more perfect union, to establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity—do ordain and establish this Constitution."

He reverently restored the parchment to the box. “Those words,” he said, “and the words that follow were not meant only for Yangs. They were for Kohms also.”

“For Kohms?” repeated Cloud William, shocked.

“They must apply to everyone—or they mean nothing. Do you understand?”

“I do not fully understand, one named Kirk. But the Holy words will be obeyed. I swear it.”

Kirk left him to address Sulu. “You and your men will have to stay a few days until your bodies pick up immunization and adjust.”

Sulu grinned. “Looks like an interesting place, Captain. You don’t suppose there’s a Shanghai or Tokyo down here, too?”

“There might be at that,” Kirk told him. He clicked open the communicator Spock handed him. “Kirk to *Enterprise*, four to Transport.”

“We’re locking in on you, Captain,” Uhura said.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy, Tracy between them, moved together for upbeam.

As they broke into dazzle, Kirk turned for a last look at the old flag upright in its standard, its stars and its stripes still bright.

ASSIGNMENT: EARTH

(Gene Roddenberry and Art Wallace)

Kirk viewed the conversion—however temporary and partial—of the *Enterprise* into a time machine with considerable misgivings. He had to recognize, of course, that an occasional assignment of this kind had become inevitable, the moment the laboratory types had had a chance to investigate the reports of the time-travel he, Spock and McCoy had been subjected to from the City on the edge of Forever, and the time-warp the whole ship had run into when it had hit the black star.

But these two experiences had only made him more acutely aware of the special danger of time-travel: the danger that the tiniest of false moves could change the future—or what was for Kirk the present—and in the process wipe out Kirk, the *Enterprise,* the Federation itself. Hovering in orbit above the Earth of 1969, even in hiding behind deflector screens, was a hair-trigger situation.

For that matter, that was why they were here, for 1969 had been a hair-trigger year. In Kirk's time, nobody really understood how the Earth had survived it. In the terrible scramble with which the year had ended, crucial documents had been lost; still others, it was strongly suspected, had been falsified. And it was not just the historians, but the Federation itself, that wanted to know the answers. They were possibly of military as well as political interest, and in a galaxy that contained the Klingon Empire as well as the Federation, they might be a good deal more than interesting.

Which explained the vast expense of sending a whole starship back in time to monitor Earth communications. Nevertheless…

His musings were interrupted by a faint but unmistakable shuddering of the deck of the bridge beneath his feet. What on Earth…

"Alert status," he snapped. "Force shields maximum. Begin sensor scan. Any station with information, report."

Immediately the telltale light for the Transporter Room went on and Kirk flipped the intercom switch.

"Spock here, Captain. We are having transporter trouble; Mr Scott just called me down to help."

"You shouldn't be using the transporter at all!"

"Nobody was, Captain. It went on by itself and we find we cannot shut it off. We seem accidentally to have intercepted someone else's transporter beam—and one a great deal more powerful than ours."

"Mr Spock, you know as well as I do that the twentieth century had no such device—" Again he was interrupted by the faint shudder. Spock's voice came back urgently: "Nevertheless, Captain, someone—or something—is beaming aboard this vessel."

"I'll be right down."

In the Transporter Room, Kirk found the situation as reported. All circuits were locked open; nothing Spock or Scott could do would close them. The familiar shimmering effect was already beginning in the transporter chamber.

"For all its power," Spock said, "that beam is originating at least a thousand light years away."

"Which," Scott added, "is a good deal farther than any transporter beam of our *own* century could reach."

The ship shuddered again, more strongly than before. "Stop fighting it," Kirk said quietly. "Set up our own field for it and let it through. Obviously we'll have serious damage otherwise."

"Aye, sir," Scott said. He worked quickly.

The shimmering grew swiftly in brightness. A haze form appeared in it, and gradually took on solidity. Kirk stared, his jaw dropped.

The figure they had pulled in. from incredibly deep space was that of a man impeccably dressed in a twentieth-century business suit. Nor was this all: in his arms he carried a sleek black cat, wearing a necklace collar of glittering white stones.

"Security detail," Kirk said. "On the double."

The stranger seemed as startled as Kirk was. He looked about the Transporter Room in baffled anger, rubbing the huge cat soothingly. The exotic element in no way detracted from his obvious personal force; he was tall, rugged, vital.

"Why have you intercepted me?" he said at once. "Please identify yourselves."

"You're aboard the United Spaceship *Enterprise.* I am Captain James Kirk, commanding."

The black cat made a strange sound, rather like one of the many odd noises a Siamese cat can make, and yet somehow also not catlike at all.

"I hear it, Isis," the stranger said. "A space vessel. But from what planet?"

"Earth."

"Impossible! At the present time Earth has no—" his voice trailed off as he became aware of Spock. Then, "Humans with a Vulcan! No wonder! You're from the future!"

He dropped the cat and reached for the control panel in the transporter chamber. "You must beam me down onto Earth immediately. There's not a moment to…"

The doors to the Transporter Room snapped open, admitting the ship's security chief and a guard, phasers drawn. At the sight of the weapons the strange man froze. The cat crouched as if for a spring, but the man said instantly, "Careful, Isis. Please listen to me carefully, all of you. My name is Gary Seven. I am a human being of the Twentieth Century. I have been living on another planet, far more advanced than the Earth is. I was beaming from there when you intercepted me."

"Where is the planet?" Kirk said.

"They wish their existence kept secret. In fact, it will remain unknown even in your time."

"It's impossible to hide a whole planet," Scott said.

"Impossible to you; not to them. Captain Kirk, I am of this time period. You are not. Interfere with me, and with what I must do down there, and you will change history. I am sure you have been thoroughly briefed on the consequence of that."

"I have," Kirk said. "On the other hand, I know nothing about you—even about the truth of anything you've told me."

"We don't have time for that. Every second you delay me is dangerous—this is the most critical year in Earth's history. My planet wants to ensure that Earth survives—an aim which should be of no small interest to you."

Kirk shook his head. "The fact that you know the criticality of the year strongly suggests that you're from the future yourself. It's a risk I can't take until I have more information. I'm afraid I'm going to have to put you in security confinement for the time being."

"You'll regret it."

"Very possibly. Nevertheless, it's what I must do." He gestured to the security chief. The guard bent to pick up the cat, but Gary Seven stepped in his way.

"If you handle Isis," he said, "you will regret *that* even more." He scooped up the cat himself and went out with the security detail.

"I want a special eye kept on that man," Kirk said. "He went along far too docilely. Also, Mr Spock, ask Dr McCoy for a fast medical analysis of the prisoner. What I want to know is, is he human? And have the cat checked, too. It may tell us something further about Mr Seven."

"It seems remarkably intelligent," Spock commented. "As well as strikingly beautiful. All the same, a strange companion to be carrying across a thousand light years on what is supposed to be an urgent mission."

"Exactly. Scotty, could that beam of his have carried him through time as well as space?"

"The theory has always indicated that it's possible," Scott said, "but *we've* never been able to manage it. On the other hand, we've never been able to put that much power into a transporter beam."

"In short, you don't know."

"That's right, sir."

"Very well. See if you can put the machinery back in order. Mr Spock, please give the necessary orders and then join me on the bridge. We are going to need *lots* of computation."

The computer said: "Present Earth crises fill an entire tape bank, Captain *Kirk.* The being Gary Seven could be intervening for *or* against Earth in areas of overpopulation, bush wars, revolutions, critically dangerous bacteriological experiments, various emergent hate movements, rising air and water pollution…"

"All right, stop," Kirk said. "What specific events are going on today?"

"Excuse me, Captain," Spock said, "but that question will simply open another floodgate. There were half a hundred critical things going on almost every day during 1969. Library, give us the three most heavily weighted of today's events in the danger file."

"There will be an important assassination today," the computer said promptly in its pleasant feminine voice. "An equally dangerous

government coup in Asia Minor; and the launching of an orbital nuclear warhead platform by the United States countering a similar launch by a consortium of other powers."

Kirk whistled. "Orbital nuclear devices were one of the greatest worries of this era, as I recall."

"They were," Spock agreed. "Once the sky was full of orbiting H-bombs, the slightest miscalculation could have brought one of them accidentally down and set off a holocaust."

"Sick bay to bridge," the intercom interrupted.

"Kirk here. What is it, Bones?"

"Jim, there isn't any prisoner in the brig. All I found there were the security chief and one guard, both of them acting as if they'd been hypnotized."

"The Transporter Room!" Kirk shouted. "Quick!"

But they were too late. There was nobody in the Transporter Room but a dazed Chief Engineer, and, a moment later, McCoy.

"I was working with my head inside an open panel," Scott said, his voice still a little blurred, "when I heard someone come in. I turned and saw him with the cat under one arm and a thing like a writing stylus pointed at me."

"A miniaturized stunner, no doubt," McCoy said.

"Well, the next thing I knew, I was willing to do anything he asked me to. In fact I beamed him down to Earth myself. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I shouldn't, but I did it anyhow."

There was a brief silence.

"And so," Spock said at last, "human or alien, contemporary or future, he has gone to do what he came to do—and we still have no idea what it is."

"We are going to find out," Kirk said. "Scotty, where did you beam him to?"

"That I can't say, Captain. He set the coordinates himself, and put the recorder on wipe. I can give you an estimate, within about a thousand square meters."

"If Spock and I beam down, working from the power consumption data alone, inside that thousand square meters, can you triangulate?"

"Aye, I can do that," Scott said. "It still won't be very precise, but it ought at least to bring you within sighting distance of the man—or whatever he is."

"It is also a major risk to history, Captain," Spock said.

"Which is just why I want you and me to be the ones to go; we had had experience with this kind of operation before. We can't find any answers sitting up here. Have ship's stores prepare proper costumes. Scotty, stand by to beam us down."

The spot where they materialized was a street on New York's upper East Side, not far from the canopied entrance of an elegant apartment building. It was a cold winter day, although there was no snow.

"All right, Scotty," Kirk said into his communicator. "Lock in and check."

"Correlated," Scott's voice said. "Readings indicate a greater altitude—approximately thirty meters higher."

Kirk looked speculatively up the face of the building. Once they entered a maze like that, they might pass within whispering distance of their quarry, behind some door, and never know it.

Nevertheless, they went into the lobby, found an elevator, and went up. At the prescribed heights, they stepped out into a hallway. Nothing but doors.

"Altitude verified, Captain," Scott's voice said. "Proceed forty-one meters, two-four-seven degrees true."

This maneuver wound them up in front of one of the doors, in no way different from any of the others. Kirk and Spock looked at each other. Then Kirk shrugged and pushed the doorbell button, which responded with a melodious chime.

The door was opened by a pretty blonde girl in her early twenties. Kirk and Spock went in, fast.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" the girl demanded. "You can't come breaking in…"

"Where's Mr Seven?" Kirk said sharply.

"I don't know who you're talking about!"

Kirk looked around. It was an ordinary Twentieth-Century living room as far as he could see, though perhaps somewhat on the sumptuous side. There was a closed door at the back. Spock pulled out his tricorder and scanned quickly, then pointed at the closed door. "In there, Captain."

They rushed the door, but it was locked. As they tried to voice in, Kirk heard an unfamiliar, brief whirring sound behind him, and then the girl's voice, all in a rush: "Operator, 811 East 68th Street, Apartment 1212, send the police…"

Kirk whirled and snatched the phone out of her hand. "No nonsense, Miss. Spock, burn the door open."

The girl gasped as Spock produced his phaser and burned out the entire knob and lock assembly. They rushed in, forcing the girl to come with them.

Here was another large room, also elegantly furnished. One wall was book-lined from a point about a meter from the floor to an equivalent distance from the ceiling. Under a large window was a heavy, ornate desk.

There was no sign of Gary Seven or anybody else. Kirk noted that this seemed to surprise the girl as much as it did himself.

Spock went to the desk, where there was a scatter of papers.

"I'm warning you," the girl said, "I've already called the police."

"Where is Mr Seven?" Kirk demanded again. "Spock, is she Twentieth Century? Or one of Seven's people?"

"Only Doctor McCoy could establish that, I'm afraid, Captain. But I think you will find these papers interesting. They are plans of the United States government's McKinley Rocket Base."

"Aha. So the orbital platform launching *is* the critical event. Now how long do we…"

The doorbell rang. The girl, catching them off guard, dashed for the door. Both men raced after her, Kirk reaching her first. As he grabbed her, she bit his hand, and them screamed.

"Open up in there!" a male voice shouted in the hallway outside. "Police!" Then the door shook to a heavy blow.

Spock too seized the girl. Kirk managed to get his communicator back into play. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Wide scan, Scotty, we'll be moving. Now!"

Another blow on the door, which burst open. Two policemen lunged in, guns drawn. Spock propelled the girl away from the group toward the library door.

At the same instant, the apartment dissolved and all four of the men—Kirk, Spock, the policemen—were standing in the transporter chamber of the *Enterprise.* The policemen looked about, stunned, but Kirk and Spock raced off the platform instantly.

"Scotty, reverse and energize!"

The policemen faded and vanished.

"Fine, fast work, Scotty."

"That poor girl," Spock said, "is going to have a lot to explain."

"I know it, but we've got something much more important to set right first. Let's have a look at those plans. Blazes, the launch is scheduled in forty minutes! Scotty, look at these. Here's a

schematic layout of a rocket base. Can you get it on the viewscreen here?"

"Easy, Captain. In fact, there's an old-style weather satellite in orbit below us; if I can bounce off that, I ought to get good closeups." He moved to the screen. In a moment, he had the base. An enormous, crude multistage rocket was already in launch position, being serviced by something Kirk dimly remembered was called a gantry crane.

"If we could spot your man," Scott added, "I could lock on and beam him up."

"The odds are that he is out of sight," Spock said. "Inside the rocket gantry, or at one of the control centers. I suppose he has a transporter hidden somewhere in that library of his. Otherwise I cannot account for his disappearance, seconds after the tricorder said he was there—or at least, *somebody* was there."

"Surely that base has security precautions," Kirk said.

"So did we," Scott pointed out.

"I see your point, Scotty. All right, continue visual scan, and stand by to beam us down again."

"Won't be necessary, sir. There he is."

And there indeed he was, at the top of the gantry. He had a panel off the side of the rocket and was working feverishly inside it. Nearby sat the black cat, watching with apparent interest.

"Why does he take a pet with him on a dangerous job like that?" Spock said.

"Immaterial now," Kirk said. "Scotty, yank him out of there!" ,

It was done within seconds. Gary Seven raged, but there was nothing he could do with four phasers leveled on him.

"Relieve him of that hypo and any other hardware he's carrying," Kirk said in a granite voice, "and then take him to the briefing room. This time, Mr Seven, we are going to get some answers."

"There's no time for that, you fool! The rocket will be launched in nine minutes—and I hadn't finished working on it!"

"Take him along," Kirk said. "And Mr Spock, put that cat in a separate cabin. Since it's so important for him to have her along, we'll see how well he stands up without her."

Kirk interviewed Seven alone, but with all intercom circuits open, and standing instructions to intervene at discretion and/or report anything that seemed pertinent.

There was no problem about getting Seven to talk. The words came out of him like water from a pressure hose.

"I am what I say I am, a Twentieth-Century human being," he said urgently. "I was one of three agents on Earth. We were equipped with an advanced transporter, and a computer, both hidden behind the bookshelves in my library. I was returned to—where I came from—for final instructions. You intercepted me and caused a critical delay. When I escaped I found both my fellow agents had been killed in a simple automobile accident. I had to work fast, and, necessarily, alone. They need the help, Captain. A rival program of orbital nuclear platforms like this destroyed Omicron III a hundred years ago. It will destroy the Earth if it isn't stopped."

"I don't deny that it's a bad program," Kirk said.

"Then why can't you believe my story? Would a truly advanced planet use force to help Earth? Would they come here in their own strange, alien forms? Nonsense! The best of all possible methods would be to take Earth-born humans to their world, train them for generations, send them back when they're needed."

"The rocket has been launched," Scott's voice responded over the intercom.

"There, you see?" Seven said desperately. "And I hadn't finished working on it. If you can beam me into its warhead I can still…"

"Not so fast. What were you going to make it do?"

"I armed the warhead, and gave it a flight path which will bring it down over Southeast Asia."

"What! That'll start a world war in nothing flat!"

"Correction, Captain," Scott's voice said. "The rocket has begun to malfunction, and alerts are being broadcast from capitals all over the world. I would say that the war has effectively started."

"So much for your humanitarian pretenses," Kirk said. "Mr Scott, prepare to intercept that rocket and beam it out into space somewhere…"

"No, no, no!" Seven cried. "That would be a highly conspicuous intervention! It would change history! Captain, I beg of you…"

"Excuse me, Captain," said Spock's voice from the intercom. "Please come to the next cabin."

"Mr Spock, that rocket will impact in something like fifteen minutes. Is this crucial?"

"Absolutely so."

After checking the guards outside the briefing room, Kirk went to the cabin where Spock had taken the cat. The cat was still there, curled up in a chair.

"What's this all about, Mr Spock?"

"Sir, I have found out why he carries this animal with him wherever he goes, even when it is obviously inconvenient. It changes the entire picture."

"In what way? Spit it out, man!"

"We have all been the victims of a drastic illusion-including Seven. The true fact is, Mr Seven has been, under the closest kind of monitoring during every instant of his activities. I suspected this and bent certain efforts to rediscipliningmy own mind to see the reality. I can now also do this for you. Look."

He pointed to the chair. Seated in it was a staggeringly beautiful woman. She had long black hair, and wore a sleek black dress and a jeweled choker necklace. Her legs were curled under her with feline grace.

"This," Spock said formally, "is Isis. And now…"

The woman was gone; only the cat was there, in a strangely similar position.

"Neither," Spock said, "is likely to be the true form of Mr Seven's sponsors, but the phenomenon supports the story that he does indeed have sponsors. Whether or not their intentions are malign must be a command decision, and one which I must leave to your human intuition, Captain."

Kirk stared at the illusory cat, which was now washing itself. Then he said, "Mr Scott!"

"Here, sir."

"Give Mr Seven back his tools and beam him into the warhead of that rocket—on the double."

The warhead blew at 104 miles. Scott snatched Seven out of it just barely in time.

"You see," Seven told them somewhat later, "it *had* to appear to be a malfunction, which luckily did not do any damage. But it frightened every government on Earth. Already there are signs that nobody will try orbiting such a monster, ever again. So despite your accidental interference from the future, my mission has been completed."

"Correction, Mister Seven," Spock said. "It appears that we did *not* interfere with history. Rather, the *Enterprise* was simply part of what was supposed to happen on this day in 1969."

Seven looked baffled. Kirk added, "We find in our record tapes that, although it was never generally revealed, on this date a malfunctioning suborbital warhead was detonated *exactly* 104 miles above the Earth. And you'll be pleased that our records show it resulted in a new and stronger international agreement against such weapons."

"I am indeed pleased," Seven said. He picked up the cat. "And now I expect to be recalled. It might save time, Captain, if you would allow me the use of your transporter. I mean no reflection on your technology, but I must get back to my own machine for the trip to—where I am going."

"Of course." Kirk rose. "Mr Scott, take Mr Seven to our Transporter Room and beam him down."

At the elevator door, Seven paused. "There is one thing that puzzles me. Your accidental interception, and your tracing me, and your interruption of my work—every one of those events was unplanned and should have produced a major disruption. Yet in each case, it turns out that I made exactly the proper next step to advance the business at hand, even though each time I was working blind. Does the course of history exert that much force on even a single individual?"

Kirk eyed the creature in Seven's arms which, whatever it was, was most certainly not a cat.

"Mr Seven," he said, "I'm afraid that we in our turn can't tell you *everything* we've learned. The credit for this day's work is largely yours—and I strongly advise you to let it rest at that."

THE LAST GUNFIGHT*

(Lee Cronin) **Spectre of the Gun* by Gene L. Coon

As the *Enterprise* approached the Melkotian system, her sensors picked up an orbiting buoy which Captain Kirk thought it best to investigate. He had orders to contact the Melkotians "at all costs"—no explanation, just "at all costs"—but he was a peaceable man, and it was his experience that peoples who posted buoys around their planetary domains had a tendency to shoot if such markers were passed without protocol.

The buoy's comments were not encouraging. It said: "Aliens. You have encroached on the space of the Melkot. You will turn back immediately. This is the only warning you will receive."

Kirk's unease at the content of this message was almost eclipsed by his surprise in receiving it in English. The uneasiness returned full force when he promptly discovered that Spock had heard it in Vulcan, Chekov in Russian, and Uhura in Swahili.

"True telepaths," Spock summed up succinctly, "can be most formidable."

This was inarguable, as was the fact that absolutely nothing was known about the Melkotians but the fact of their existence. The orders were also inarguable. Kirk broadcast a message of peaceful intent, and getting no answer—not that he had expected any—proceeded, wondering what in the Universe a race of true telepaths could be afraid of.

When the ship was in range, Kirk beamed down to the planet, accompanied by Spock, McCoy, Scott and Chekov. The spot on which they materialized was a sort of limbo—a place of twisting fog, unidentifiable shapes, feelings, colors. Spock's tricorder refused to yield any further information; it was as though they were in some sort of dead spot where no energy could flow, or at least none could enter. To Kirk it felt rather more like the eye of a hurricane.

Then the Melkotian materialized—or partially materialized, almost like an image projected against the fog. He was essentially humanoid: a tall, thin, robed figure, with cold pale features, a high

forehead, and piercing eyes that seemed to be utterly without feeling.

"Our warning was plain," he said in his illusion of many languages. His lips did not move. "You have disregarded it. You, Captain Kirk, ordered this disobedience. Therefore from you we shall draw the pattern of your death."

"Death!" Kirk said. "For trespassing? Do you call yourselves civilized?"

"You are Outside," the figure said. "You are Disease. We do not argue with malignant organisms; we destroy them. It is done."

The figure winked out. "Talk about your drumhead court rnartials," Scott said.

No one heard him, for the limbo had winked out at the same time. Instead, the five men appeared to be standing in a desert, in bright, hot sunlight. As they stared, a wooden building popped into existence; then another, and another. None of them were more than two storeys high, generally with porches at the second storey. One of them bore a sign reading, "Saloon," another, "Tombstone Hotel." Within seconds they were surrounded by a town.

"Spock," Kirk said quietly. "Evaluation."

"American frontier, circa 1880," Spock said.

"And what's this?" Chekov said, holding out a gun. It was not a phaser. A quick check showed that none of them any longer had a phaser, or a communicator; only these pieces of ironware, slung low around their hips from belts loaded with what appeared to be ammunition. Their uniforms, however, had not changed.

"That," Kirk said, "is a Colt .45—perfect for the period. My ancestors came from a background like this."

"Perfect, but dangerous, Captain," Spock said. "I suggest we dispose of them."

"Certainly not, Mr Spock. Whatever the Melkotians plan for us, it's not likely to be pleasant. And at close range, these things are as deadly as phasers. We may have to use them as such."

"Jim, that shack over there calls itself Tombstone Epitaph," McCoy said. "Sounds like a newspaper. And there's a bulletin board on it. Let's see if we can pick up a little more information."

The bulletin board carried a copy of the day's paper. It was dated Tombstone, Arizona, October 26, 1881.

"Back in time, Mr Spock?" Kirk said.

"And an instantaneous space crossing as well, Captain?" Spock said. "I don't care to entertain the notion of so many physical laws being violated at the same time. The energy expenditure alone would be colossal—far beyond anything we've ever detected on Melkot. I suspect we are exactly where we were before."

"Then what's the purpose of this—this setup?"

"As I understand it, Captain," Spock said gently, "the purpose is an execution."

"We can always depend on you for a note of cheer," McCoy said.

There was something about the date that nagged at Kirk's mind. As he was trying to place it, however, an unshaven man came around a corner, saw the five men, and stared. Then he said: "Well, I'll be jiggered! Ike! Frank, Billy, Tom!" He came closer. "I was afraid you weren't going to make it."

"I beg your pardon?" Kirk said.

"But I knew you wouldn't let 'em scare you away. They're a lot of hot air, if you ask me. But now they'll have to fight, after the way they've shot off their mouths."

"Look here," Kirk said. "Obviously you think you know us. But we don't know you. We've never seen you before."

The unshaven man winked solemnly. "I getcha. I ain't seen you today, neither. That's what I like about you, Ike, you always see the funny side. And nobody can say Johnny Behan doesn't have a sense of humor."

"I'm a barrel of laughs," Kirk said. "But look, Mr Behan…"

"Just one thing," Behan said. "I wouldn't take them too lightly if I was you. They may shoot wild, but they're gonna have to shoot."

As if alarmed by what he himself had said, Behan shot a glance over his shoulder and scuttled off. At the same instant, Kirk grasped the memory he had been struggling for.

"The Earps!" he said. Spock looked baffled; so did the others.

"He called me Ike," Kirk said. "And he called you Frank, and Bones, Tom, and Chekov, Billy. That's Ike Clanton, Frank and Tom McClowery, Billy Claiborne and Billy Clanton."

"Captain," Spock said, "I know something about this segment of Earth history, but those names mean nothing to me."

"Me either," McCoy said.

"All right. Try Wyatt Earp. Morgan Earp. Virgil Earp. Doc Holliday." There was no reaction. "It goes like this. In the late nineteenth century, in Arizona, two factions fought it out for control of the town of Tombstone. The Earps were the town

marshals. The Clantons were lined up with Billy Behan, the County Sheriff. And on October 26, they had it out."

"And?" Chekov said.

"The Clantons lost, Mr Chekov."

There was silence. At last Spock said, "This is certainly a most fanciful method of execution. But what did they mean by…"

A woman's scream cut through the still, hot air. From the direction of the saloon came a roar of men's voices and the unmistakable sounds of a brawl. Then a man stumbled backwards out of the swinging doors and fell down the steps into the street. Another man came after him like a flash.

As the first man picked himself up out of the dust, he reached quickly for his holster. He was way too late. His pursuer's gun went off with an astonishingly loud noise, like a thunderclap, and his twisted body was hurled back almost to Kirk's feet. The second man turned and went back through the swinging doors without another glance.

McCoy knelt beside the body and took its pulse. "Cold-blooded murder," he said angrily.

"I believe the phrase," Spock said, "is 'frontier justice.' "

"I can't believe it's real," Chekov said. "It's all just some sort of Melkotian illusion."

"Is the man dead, Bones?"

"Very dead, Jim."

"Well," Kirk said grimly, "that seems to be at least one thing that's real here."

From the saloon came a burst of music—a piano, recognizable in any era—and a shout of laughter. The five from the *Enterprise* looked down at the lonely dead man, and then, in almost a nightmare of compulsion, at the saloon.

"I think," Kirk said, "we'd better find out what's happening."

"Go in *there?*" Chekov said.

"Has anybody a better idea?"

There was a bartender, a pretty and very young waitress, and about a dozen customers; most of the latter were clustered around the killer of a moment before, who sat at a table. He rose slowly as the five came through the doors.

"Ike, Tom," the bartender said. He seemed both pleased and scared to see them. Here, at least, the Clantons had some sort of friend. "Hiya, boys. Didn't think we'd see you again."

The waitress turned. "Billy!" she cried with delight, and flinging herself on the astonished and delighted Chekov, kissed him thoroughly. "Billy baby, I knew they couldn't keep you out of town."

"I didn't have much choice," Chekov said.

The girl led them toward a table a good distance away from that of the killer. "But maybe you shouldn't have," she said.

"And passed up the chance to see you? Don't be silly."

"But it's takin' crazy chances, with Morgan right in the same room."

Kirk, who had sat down, rose slowly again to get a closer look at the first of the men at whose hands they had been condemned to die. "Of course," he said. "The gentleman who kills on sight. Morgan Earp."

Earp did not move, but he watched Kirk with stony intentness.

"Captain," Spock said, *sotto voce,* "since we have seen that death is the one reality in this situation, I seriously advise that you reseat yourself without moving a muscle of either hand. Otherwise you will find yourself involved in something called 'the fast draw,' if I remember correctly. The results would be unfortunate."

Kirk sat down. As he did so, the bartender called, "You boys want your usual?"

"Absolutely," Scotty said enthusiastically. "Half a liter of Scotch."

"You know we ain't got nothin' but bourbon. 'Less you want gin."

"I don't think we've got the time for a party," Kirk said. He looked at Chekov, in whose lap the girl was now sitting. "Of any kind."

"What can I do, Captain? You know we're always supposed to maintain good relations with the natives."

"That's all right," the girl said, getting up. "I know you boys have got some palaverin' to do. Billy Claiborne, you be careful." She hurried away.

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "except for these handguns we're wearing, we haven't changed. Not even our clothing. Yet these people see us as the Clantons."

"I don't find that such a bad thing, Captain," Chekov said, his eyes still following the waitress.

"The day is still young, Ensign," Spock said.

"Now then, what have we got? We're in Tombstone on the day of the fight at the OK Corral, and we're the Clanton gang. Morgan Earp there will tell his brothers we're here."

"And history will follow its course," Spock said.

"It will not," Kirk said angrily. "I have no intention of letting a bunch of half-savage primitives kill us."

"May I ask, Captain, how you plan to prevent it?"

Without replying directly, Kirk got up and went over to the bar. "You, Mr Bartender. You claim to know us."

"Ain't makin' no big claims about it to nobody," the bartender said. "Jest so happens."

"Well, you're wrong. You think I'm Ike Clanton. I'm not. I'm James T. Kirk, Captain of the Starship *Enterprise.* And these men are some of my officers. We're not really here at all; in fact, we haven't been born yet."

There was a roar of laughter from the onlookers, and somebody said, "Don't you jest bet he wishes he hadn't been."

Kirk whirled to the nearest man. "Here, you. Feel the material of my shirt." The man snickered, but complied. "Doesn't it feel any different from yours?"

"Reckon it does," the cowboy said. "A mite cleaner, I'd jedge."

"Have you ever seen men wearing clothes like these before?"

The cowboy thought a moment. Then he said earnestly, "Sure. On the Clantons."

There was another outburst of laughter and thigh-slapping.

"Looka here, now," the cowboy said. "You was always a great one for jokin', Ike. But I know you. Ed here," indicating the barkeeper, "knows you. That Sylvia, she sure knows Billy Claiborne. Now, if'n you want to pertend you're somebody else, that's your business. Only, if you've turned yellow, what'd you come back to town for at all?"

Kirk frowned and tried to think, twirling his gun absently. The cowboy turned pale and backed away a step. Realizing belatedly what he had done, Kirk returned the gun to its holster and swung back to the barkeeper.

"Ed…"

"It's okay with me, Ike," Ed said placatingly. "Anything you say. It don't make no difference who I think you are. Your problem is—who does Wyatt Earp think you are?"

Hopelessly, Kirk returned to the table. His men looked at him strangely. What was the matter with *them,* now?

"Well, scratch that," he said, sitting down. "I can't get through to them."

"Captain."

"Yes, Mr Spock."

"We know that the Melkotians are true telepaths. And the Melkot said that it was from you that he would 'draw the pattern' of our deaths."

"Are you suggesting that because I'm familiar with this part of American history…?"

"He looked into your mind, and selected what he considered to be the best time and place for our punishment. Yes, Captain. While you were pacing back and forth up there at the bar, I was recalling certain tapes in the computers. All unconsciously, you are adopting the true gunfighter's slouch. And a moment ago, you were handling the weapon like an expert."

"Some inherited characteristic?" McCoy said. "Ridiculous. Acquired characteristics can't be inherited."

"I know that, Dr McCoy," Spock said stiffly. "The suggestion was yours, not mine. On the other hand, the possibility of ancestral memories—archetypes drawn from the collective unconscious, if such a thing exists—has never been disproved. And you observed the Captain's behavior yourself. As a further test, would you care to draw your own gun and twirl it, then return it smoothly to its holster, as the Captain did?"

"I wouldn't dare," McCoy admitted. "I'd be better off with a club."

"Let me make sure I understand this," Kirk said. "Do you further suggest that the Melkot is counting on me to act completely like one of these frontiersmen? To respond instinctively to the challenge of the Earps, and so bring about our—end?"

"Not instinctively, Captain, but certainly unconsciously. It's a possibility you must be on guard against."

"I'll bear it in mind. Now, has anybody any other suggestions for breaking this pattern?"

"Why don't we just get out of town, Captain?" Chekov said.

"There is no such place as 'out of town,' " Spock said. "Bear in mind, Ensign Chekov, that we are actually on the planet of the Melkots. Were we to leave this area, they would have no more difficulty in returning us to it than they did in putting us in it in the first place."

"Logic again," McCoy said. "Why don't you forget logic for a while and try to think of something that *would* work? If we only had a phaser—or better yet, a communicator! It'd be a pleasure to see the faces of those Earps as we were beamed back to the ship exactly thirty seconds before the big blow-down, or whatever it's called."

"Bones, you have a point," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, when we were thrown back in time from the City on the edge of Forever, you managed to construct a functioning computer out of your tricorder. And you've got a tricorder here."

"But we were thrown back then to the Chicago of the 1930's," the First Officer said. "In those days, the technology was just barely up to supplying me with the necessary parts and power. Here we have no gem stones to convert to tuning crystals, no metals to work, not even a source of electricity."

"He's quite right there, Captain," Scott said. "I couldn't turn the trick myself, under these conditions."

"Then," Kirk said, "it would appear that we're limited to contemporary solutions."

"Maybe not," McCoy said thoughtfully. "We have gunpowder in these shells. And surely there are drugs of some kind in town. One of the Earp crowd is called 'Doc'…"

"He was a dentist," Kirk said.

"Nevertheless, he must have drugs, herbs of some kind. Cotton wadding. A mortar and pestle. Alcohol—we can use whisky for that if we have to."

"What do you have in mind?" Kirk said.

"What would happen if we turned up at the OK Corral with no guns at all—just slingshots—*and tranquilizing darts?*"

Slowly, Kirk began to grin. "A fine notion. What's the first step, Bones?"

"I'll go and see Doc Holliday."

"But he's one of the opposition. We'd better all go."

"Absolutely not," McCoy said. "That would start shooting for sure. I'll go by myself, and see what I can talk him out of, as one medical man to another. And the rest of you, if I may so suggest, had better drop out of sight until I get back."

"All right, Bones," Kirk said slowly. "But watch yourself."

"I'll do that," McCoy said. "It's myself I'm fondest of in all the world."

Doc Holliday's office, as it turned out, was in a barbershop. As McCoy entered, he had a patient in the chair. Doc Holliday was pulling; the patient was kicking and hollering. McCoy stared with fascination over Holliday's shoulder.

Holliday had evidently never heard of white coats. He was wearing a black frock coat, tight pants, a flat hat, and a string tie —a more elaborate version of the outfit McCoy had seen on Morgan Earp.

After a moment of watching the dentist sweat, McCoy said, "Impacted, I gather."

Holliday grunted abstractedly. Then apparently recognizing the voice, he leapt back, clearing his coat tail from his gun. He glared at McCoy.

"You want it now, McClowery?"

"Actually, the family name is McCoy."

"Look Doc," the patient said, looking up impatiently. "Are you going to pull it now, or—" Then he, too, recognized McCoy and turned white as milk. "Boys, please, no shootin'! Doc, put away your gun."

He tried to get out of the chair; Holliday slammed him back into it. "Sit!" the dentist said. "I ain't been through all that for nothin'. As fer you, McClowery, if you're goin' t'backshoot a medical man in the performance of his duties…"

"Not at all. I'm interested in medical matters myself. Mind if I take a look?" McCoy pried open the patient's mouth and peered in. "Hmm, that tooth is in sad shape, all right. What do you use for anesthetic, Preliform D? No, of course you don't have that yet. Chloroform? Is it possible you actually use chloroform? If so, why isn't the patient asleep?"

"What do you know about it, McClowery?"

"I've pulled a few teeth myself."

"I use whisky," Holliday said. "I never heard of chloroform."

"Tricky stuff, alcohol. You think the patient's too drunk to know his own name, and then there's a little pain, and bang! He's cold sober. Especially with a badly impacted tooth like that. Probably needs some root canal work, too."

"Whisky's all I got," Holliday said, a little sullenly.

"Well, actually, you don't need an anesthetic at all. Simple matter of pressure. A Vulcan friend of mine showed it to me. If

you don't mind—" he took the crude pliers from Holliday, examined them, and shrugged. "Well, they'll have to do."

"Now look, McClowery…"

"No, you look, Doctor." McCoy thrust a finger into the patient's mouth. "There's a pressure point above the superior mandible—right here. Press it—hard, mind you—then you…"

He reached in with the pliers, closed, tugged. In a moment he was holding the tooth before Holliday's astonished face.

"Hey!" said the patient. "What happened? Did you—it's gone! It's gone—and I didn't feel a thing!"

"Nothing?" Holliday said incredulously.

"Not a thing."

"Where'd you learn that trick, McClowery?"

"You'd never believe me if I told you. Doctor, you're from the South, aren't you?"

"Georgia."

"Is that a fact! I'm from Atlanta myself."

"Is that so? I never knew that," Holliday said. "Now that's a cryin' shame, me havin' to kill another Georgia man, with this place crawlin' with Yankees and all."

"Actually, I could do you a favor, if I had time. You're not well, Doctor. Those eyes—that pallor—by George, I've never seen a case before, but I do believe you have tuberculosis. If I could run a quick physical…"

With a roar of rage, Holliday slammed his six-shooter on the table top. The patient sprang from the barber's chair and ran.

"One more peep out of you," Holliday said, "and you won't even hold water!"

"Why? What are you so mad about?"

"I may have bad lungs, but I've got a good aim!"

"Doctor," McCoy said, "if I had my kit here, I could clear those lungs up with one simple injection. One shot, twelve hours of rest, and the disease would be gone. Without the kit, it'll have to take more time."

"Time is just what you're short on," Holliday said. "You seem like a halfway decent sort, though. Why don't you play it smart and come in with us?"

"What—double-cross Kirk?"

"No, just the Clantons."

"Can't do it," McCoy said. "But if you don't mind our parting friends for the moment, I'd like to borrow a few drugs."

Holliday gestured expansively. "A favor for a favor. Just don't expect me to shoot wild at five o'clock tonight."

It was just that casually that McCoy learned the hour of their death.

As he emerged into the street, the sunlight blinded him for a moment. Then he became aware that Sylvia was crossing the street near him, her eyes averted. He was puzzled at the apparent cut—after all, she had seemed friendly enough to the Clantons in the saloon—and then realized that there were three other men on his side of the street, lounging outside the Marshal's office. All three were wearing the same kind of outfit as Holliday, and since one of them was Morgan, it did not take much guessing to figure out that the other two must be Virgil and Wyatt Earp.

McCoy stepped back into the doorway of the barbershop. At the same time, Morgan grinned, nudged one of his brothers, and stepped out to cut Sylvia off.

"What's the matter, honey?" he said, taking her elbow.

Sylvia tugged at her arm. "Let me go!"

"I'm just letting you get a jump on things. After tonight, there ain't goin' to be any Billy Claiborne."

Both the watching brothers tensed suddenly, their grins fading. McCoy followed the direction of their stares. To his horror, he saw Chekov coming down the middle of the street, jaw set, face flushed.

Morgan saw him too. He gently thrust the girl to one side, still holding her with his left hand. "Well," he said. "Here he is—the baby who walks like a man."

"Take your hands off her, you…"

Morgan abruptly thrust Sylvia away. Chekov went for his gun, but there was only one shot; Chekov's gun didn't even clear his holster. With a look of infinite surprise, he clawed at the growing red stain on the front of his tunic, and then pitched forward on his face.

McCoy was already running, and as he hit the dirt, he saw Kirk and Spock rounding a corner at top speed. Morgan Earp stepped back a few paces, contemptuously. McCoy fell to his knees beside Chekov, just in time to feel the last feeble thrill of life flutter out.

He looked up at Kirk. Scotty was there too; God knew where he had arrived from.

"Bones?" Kirk whispered, his face gray.

"I can't do a thing, Jim."

Kirk looked slowly toward the smiling Earps. Fury began to take possession of his face. McCoy heard the grating noise of the barbershop door opening; evidently Doc Holliday was coming out to join his confreres.

"Well, Ike?" Wyatt Earp said softly. "Want to finish it now?"

Kirk took a step forward, his hand dropping toward his gunbutt. Spock and Scott grabbed him, almost simultaneously. "Let me go," Kirk said, in a low, grinding voice.

"Yeah, let him go," Morgan said. "Let's see how much stomach he's got."

"Control yourself, Captain," Spock said.

McCoy rose slowly, keeping his own hand near his gun, though it felt heavily strange and useless on his hip; it occurred to him that the thing was at least three times as heavy as a phaser. "Easy, Jim," he said. "You wouldn't have a chance. None of us would."

"They murdered that boy! You think I'm going to…"

"You've got to," Scott said intensely. "You lose *your* head and where would the rest of us be? Not just the laddie, but…"

"More data," Spock said. "Jim, listen to me. We need more data."

"Smart, Clanton," Wyatt said. "Get as much living in as you can."

Slowly, slowly, Kirk allowed himself to be turned away. His face was terrible with grief.

In a back room of the saloon, Spock fitted nail points to darts; McCoy dipped the points into a mortar which contained a tacky brown elixir—his improvised tranquilizing drug. Five even more improvised slingshots lay to hand, as did an almost denuded feather duster—supplied by Sylvia—from which Spock had fletched the darts.

"I can only hope these will fly true," Spock said. "A small hand-driven wind tunnel would help, but we have no time to build one."

"Somehow I can't seem to care," Kirk said. "Sometimes the past won't let go. It cuts too deep. Hasn't that ever happened to you?"

"I understand the feeling, Captain."

" 'I understand the feeling,' " McCoy mimicked angrily. "Chekov is dead and you talk about what another man feels. What do *you*

feel?"

"My feelings are not a subject for discussion."

"There aren't any to discuss," McCoy said disgustedly.

"Can that be true?" Kirk said. "Chekov is dead. I say it now, yet I can hardly believe it. You knew him as long as I did, you worked with him as closely. That deserves its memorial."

"Spock will have no truck with grief," McCoy said. "It's human."

"I did not mean any disrespect to your grief," Spock said from behind his mask. "I, too, miss Ensign Chekov."

There was silence for a moment. Dully, Kirk realized that they had been unfair to the First Officer. No matter how often we run into the problem, he thought, we'll never get used to Spock's hidden emotional life.

Upstairs, a grandfather clock struck four. Time was running out.

"Captain, I've been thinking," Spock said. "I know nothing about the history of the famous gun battle we seem about to be engaged in. Was the entire Clanton gang involved?"

"Yes."

"Were there any survivors?"

"Let me think—yes. Billy Claiborne—*Billy Claiborne*!"

"Thus we are involved in a double paradox. The real Billy Claiborne was in the battle. 'Our' Billy Claiborne will not be. The real Billy Claiborne survived the fight. 'Ours' is already dead. History has already been changed."

"And maybe we can change it again," Kirk said with dawning hope. "Bones, how long will that tranquilizer goo of yours need to take effect?"

"No more than three or four seconds, I think. But of course it hasn't been tested. No experimental animals."

"Try it on me," Scotty suggested. "I have an animal nature."

"Well—a dilute solution, maybe. Okay. Roll up your sleeve."

"Captain," Spock said, "may I propose that this is also an opportunity to see how the darts fly? We can put Dr McCoy's dilute solution on one."

"Too dangerous. Slingshots can kill at short range. Remember David and Goliath."

"Vaguely. But I do not propose to use a sling—only to throw the dart by hand."

Scott ambled across the room to a bureau, on which he leaned like a man leaning on a bar, imaginary glass in hand, his hip thrust

out. “How’s this?”

“A prime target.” Spock threw the dart, gently, underhand. It lodged fair and square in Scott’s left buttock. He said, “Oof,” but held the pose. They watched him intently.

Nothing happened. After five long minutes, McCoy went over to him and withdrew the dart. “It penetrated the muscle,” he said. “It should have worked by now. Feel anything, Scotty?”

“Nothing at all.”

“No sweating? No dizziness? No palpitations?”

“I never felt better in my life.”

McCoy’s face fell. “I don’t understand it,” he said. “Full strength, that stuff should knock out a charging elephant.”

“Fascinating,” Spock said.

“Fascinating!” Kirk exploded. “Mr Spock, don’t you realize that this is our death warrant? There isn’t time to devise anything else!”

“It is nevertheless fascinating,” Spock said slowly. “First a violation of physics, then a violation of history—now a violation of human physiology. These three violations cannot be coincidence. They must contain some common element—some degree of logical consistency.”

“Well, let’s see if we can think it through,” Kirk said. “But there’s one last chance. We may be able to violate history again. Ten minutes from now, it’s all supposed to end at the OK Corral. Very well—we are not going to be there. We are going to sit right here. We are not going to move from this spot.”

Spock nodded slowly, but he was frowning. The others braced themselves, as if daring anyone to move them.

Flip!

Sunlight blazed upon them from a low angle. They were in the OK Corral.

“Let’s get out of here!” Kirk said. He vaulted over the fence, hearing the others thump to the ground after him, and dashed into an alley. At the other end, he paused to reconnoiter.

Ahead was the corral, with a wagon box and several horses tied in front of it. Kirk started, momentarily stunned.

“Must have gotten turned around,” he said. “This way.”

He led the way back up the alley. Its far end debouched onto the main street. They crossed quickly into another alley, jogging, watching the blank wooden buildings that hemmed them in.

At the end of the alley was the OK Corral.

"They're breeding like pups," Scotty said.

"Down that way…"

But 'down that way' also ended at the OK Corral.

"They've got us," Kirk said stonily. "The Melkotians don't mean for us to miss this appointment. All right. Remember that these guns are heavier than phasers. Pull them straight up—and drag them *down* into line the minute you've fired off the first shot."

"Captain," Spock said, "that is suicide. We are none of us skilled in the use of these weapons. Nor can we avoid the OK Corral, that is quite clear. But—very quickly—let me ask you, what killed Ensign Chekov?"

"Mr Spock, he was killed by a bullet."

"No, Captain. He was killed by his own mind. Listen to me, please; this is urgent. The failure of Dr McCoy's drug was the clue. *This place is unreal.* It is a telepathic forgery by the Melkotians. Nothing that happens here is real. Nothing at all."

"Chekov is dead," McCoy said grimly.

"In this environment, yes. Elsewhere—we cannot know. We can judge reality only by the responses of our senses. Once we are convinced of the reality of a given situation, our minds abide by its rules: the guns are solid, the bullets are real, they can kill. But only because we believe it!"

"I see the Earps coming toward us," Kirk said. "And they look mighty convincing—and deadly. So do their guns. Do you think you can protect us just by disbelieving in them?"

"I can't protect anybody but myself, Captain; you must entertain your own disbelief—totally. One single doubt, and you will die."

The three Earps, side by side, black-clad and grim, walked slowly down the street, their faces expressionless. Pedestrians scurried away from them like startled quail.

"Mr Spock," Kirk said, "we can't turn disbelief on, and off like clockwork. I know you can; but we're just human beings."

"The Vulcanian mind meld," Dr McCoy said suddenly.

"Yes, Dr McCoy. I could not have suggested it myself; I have cultural blocks against invading another man's mind. But if you will risk it…"

"I will."

McCoy hesitated. Then he stepped back until his back was against the wagon box. Spock came to him, closer and closer, his fingers spreading. Face to face, closer and closer.

"Your mind to my mind," Spock said softly. "Your thoughts to my thoughts. Listen to me, Bones. Be with me. Be one with me."

McCoy closed his eyes, and then slowly, opened them again.

The three Earps had been joined by Doc Holliday. He was holding a double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun under his frock coat. He fell in step with the brothers. Funereal in look and aspect, grim and unsmiling, rhythmic as a burial procession, they came down the street, real, the quintessence of death.

Spock's fingers moved to Kirk's face. "They are unreal—without body," he whispered. "Listen to me, Jim. Be with me. They are only illusion, shadows without substance. They cannot affect you. My heart to your heart, I promise you."

The Earps and Holliday marched on across the lengthening shadows. The shotgun barrel swung periodically under Holliday's coattails. Their cheeks were hollow, their eyes dark as pitch. The street behind them was frozen, and the sky was darkening.

"Scotty," Spock said, his voice suddenly taking on a dark, Caledonian color, as deep as that of a prophet's. "Listen to me. Clouds these are without water, carried about by winds. They are trees whose fruit withereth, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of eternity, forever."

The spectral stalkers halted, perhaps ten paces away. Wyatt Earp said, "Draw."

Kirk looked at his people. Their expressions were glassy, faraway, strange, like lambs awaiting the slaughter. With a slight nod, he dropped his hand toward his gunbutt.

The Earps drew. It seemed as though twenty pistol shots rang out in as many seconds—two shotgun blasts—another pistol shot. The street fogged with the smoke and stench of black powder. Every single shot had come from the Earps' side.

"Thank you, Mr Spock," Kirk said tranquilly, staring into the eyes of the astonished gunmen. "And now, gentlemen, if you please, let's finish this up—fast, hard and good."

The four from the *Enterprise* moved in on the Earps. The gunmen were accustomed to shoot-outs and to pistol-whipping and to barroom brawls; but against advanced space-age karate techniques and Spock's delicately precise knowledge of the human nervous system's multiple vulnerabilities, they had no defense whatsoever. Within moments, 'history' was a welter of unconcious black-clad bodies in the dust…

? And Tombstone, Arizona, wavered, pulsed, faded, and vanished into a foggy limbo.

In the fog, Kirk became aware that Chekov was standing beside him. He had to swallow twice before he could manage to say, "Welcome back, Ensign."

He had no time to say more, for the transparent figure of the Melkot was forming against the eerie backdrop of the mists.

"Explain," the Melkot said.

"Glad to," Kirk said, in a voice far from friendly. "What would you like explained?"

"To you the bullets were unreal. To the players we put against you, the bullets were real, and would kill. But you did not kill them."

"We kill only in self-defense," Kirk said. "Once we saw that it was unnecessary to kill your players, we protected ourselves less wastefully, on all sides."

"Is this," the Melkot said, "the way of your kind?"

"By and large. We are not all alike. But in general, we prefer peace—and I speak not only for my species, but for a vast alliance of fellow creatures who subscribe to the same tenets. We were sent here to ask you to join it."

There was a long silence. And as they waited, the familiar fading effect began again—and then they were on the bridge of the *Enterprise.*

Uhura was at her post. She did not seem at all surprised to see them. In fact, her manner was so matter-of-fact as to suggest that they had never left at all.

Chekov began to react, but Kirk held up his hand in warning. Puzzled, Chekov said in a low voice, "Captain—what happened? Where have I been?"

"Where do you think?"

"Why—right here, it seems. But I remember a girl…"

"Nothing else?"

"No," Chekov said. "But she seemed so real…"

"Perhaps that explains why you're here. Nothing else was real to you."

Chekov looked more baffled than ever, but evidently decided to leave well enough alone.

“Captain,” Lt. Uhura said, “I’m getting a transmission from the Melkot buoy.”

“Cycle it for sixty seconds. Mr Spock, has any time elapsed since the—uh—last time we all sat here?”

“The clock says not, Captain.”

“I suspected not. Did it happen?”

“I cannot give a yes or no answer, Captain. It is a matter of interpretation.”

“All right, Lt. Uhura. Let’s hear what the Melkotian buoy has to say.”

The buoy said: “Aliens! You have entered the space of the Melkot. We welcome you and promise peaceful contact.”

“Very good. Lt. Uhura, ask them to specify a meeting place. Mr Spock, a word with you in private, please.”

Spock obediently drew to one side of the bridge with his Captain.

“Mr Spock, once again we owe you our thanks for quick, thorough and logical thinking. But I will tell you something else. Privately, and for no other ears than yours, I think you are a sentimental bag of mush.”

“Sir!”

“I heard what you said to me, and to the other men, when you were convincing us not to believe in the Melkotian illusions. Every word was based upon the most intimate understanding of each man involved—understanding—and honest love.”

“Captain,” Spock said, from behind his mask, “I did what was necessary.”

“Of course you did. Very well, Mr Spock—carry on.”

But as Spock went stiffly back to his library-computer, the commandatorial eyes which followed him were not without a certain glitter of amusement.

ELAAN OF TROYIUS

(John Meredyth Lucas)

Kirk's orders were simple. He was to "cooperate" in all matters pertaining to the mission of his passenger, the Ambassador of the planet Troyius.

It was the implications of his orders that were complicated. First, the Ambassador's mission was top secret. Second, his negotiations involved the notoriously hostile people of Elas, a neighbor planet. As if such "cooperation" weren't enough of a headache, both planets were located in a star system over which the Klingon Empire claimed jurisdiction. By entering the system, the *Enterprise* was inviting Klingon retaliation for trespass.

Kirk was frankly irritated as he swung his command chair to Uhura. "Inform Transporter Room we'll be beaming-up the Elas party at once. Ask Ambassador Petri to meet us there."

"Yes, Captain."

At his nod, Spock, McCoy and Scott followed him into the elevator. Kirk said, "Some deskbound Starfleet bureaucrat has cut these cloak-and-dagger orders."

The intercom spoke. "Bridge to Captain." It was Uhura's voice.

"Kirk here."

"Captain, signal from the Elas party. They're ready to beam aboard but demand an explanation of the delay."

"Here we go," Kirk said. "What delay are they talking about? All right. Forget it, Lieutenant Uhura. Beam them aboard."

Spock said, "The attitude is typical of the Elasians, sir. Scientists who made the original survey of the planet described their men as vicious and arrogant."

"That's the negative aspect," McCoy said. "I've gone over those records. Their women are supposed to be something very special. They're said to possess a kind of subtle—maybe mystical—-power that drives men wild."

Spock gave McCoy a disgusted look. It was still on his face when the elevator door opened to reveal the waiting Troyian envoy. Kirk

addressed him immediately. "Ambassador Petri, suppose you drop this diplomatic secrecy—and tell me what this mission of yours is really about."

"That must wait until the Dohlman of Elas is aboard, Captain."

"Dohlman?" Kirk said as they all entered the Transporter Room. "What the devil is a Dohlman?"

"The thing most feared and hated by my people. Our most deadly enemy," Petri said.

The Transporter Room's hum deepened—and three figures sparkled into substance on the platform. They were soldiers. Breast plates covered their chests. Weapons of no recognizable variety hung from the barbaric chains around their necks. The biggest Elasian soldier, thick-jawed, heavy-browed, covered the *Enterprise* group with his strange weapon.

"Welcome. I am the Ambassador of Troyius," Petri said.

The ape-jawed giant ignored him. "Who runs this ship?"

Kirk said, "The *Enterprise* is under my command. I am Captain Kirk."

"And I am Kryton of Elas. That Troyian there is a menace. I must know that all is secure here before the Dohlman is brought aboard."

Spock lowered his voice. "Captain, the weapons resemble twenty-first century nuclear disintegrators."

Kirk spoke to the bellicose Kryton. "My ship is secure. What's more, we are equipped to repel any hostile act." He turned his back on the Elasian to say to the Transporter Room technician. "Energize!"

The center transporter platform went luminous. The three Elasians dropped to one knee. Glaring at Kirk, Kryton growled, "Quickly! To your knee! Do honor to the Dohlman of Elas!"

Kirk's jaw tightened. Beside him, acquiescent, Petri sank to one knee. "It is their custom," he muttered. "To stand is a breach of protocol."

Spock looked at Kirk. Annoyance on his face, Kirk nodded. The Vulcan hesitated; then, he, too, bent his knee. The sight increased Kirk's annoyance. It was abruptly dissipated. On the center platform the "deadly enemy" of Troyius had appeared. The Dohlman was a silver blonde. Her skin had the pearly tone of dreams. So was her body the stuff of dreams. Nor was it hidden. The scanty metallic scarves she wore served no purpose but suggestion of beauty too overwhelming for complete revelation.

Kryton said, "Glory to Elaan, Dohlman of Elas!"

"Glory is right," Kirk thought, controlling an impulse to kneel himself. Instead, he bowed. Then, raising his head, he looked again at the Dohlman of Elas. Under the silver blonde hair, her eyes were dark. Aflame with contempt, they swept over the kneeling men. At a snap of her fingers, her soldier bodyguard got to their feet, Kryton, addressing Spock and Petti, said, "Now you may stand."

She came forward, Kryton towering behind her, tense, his weapon at the ready. Her own hand rested on the elaborately jeweled hilt of a dagger suspended from a golden chain she wore around her slim waist.

"Odd," Kirk said to Spock. "Body armor and nuclear weapons."

"Not without precedent, sir. Consider the Samurai customs of old Earth's Japanese. Even we Vulcans preserve some symbolic remnants of our past."

Kryton growled again. "Permission to speak was not given!"

Before Kirk could retort, Elaan said to Spock, "You rule this ship?" The voice was husky, infinitely feminine.

"I am the ship's First Officer. This is Captain Kirk."

She made no sign of acknowledgment. Petri interposed hastily. "Your glory, I am Petri of Troyius. In the name of my people, I bid you welcome to—"

"Your mission is known to me," she said with negligent scorn. Then, turning to Kirk, she added, "You are permitted to show the accommodations."

He pulled himself together. "I think we'd better have an understanding right—"

"*Please,* Captain," Petri begged.

Kirk said, "My First Officer, Mr Spock will show you to your quarters." He turned to leave. "Ambassador Petri, I want to speak to you."

Elaan's words came like a whip. "You have not been dismissed."

Incredulous, on the edge of explosion, Kirk gave his response second thought. He decided to shrug. "May I have your glory's permission to leave?" he asked silkily.

"You are all dismissed," she said.

Outside in the corridor Kirk wheeled on Petri. "All right, Ambassador! What exactly are we supposed to be doing?"

Petri drew him aside. "She—that woman is to be the wife of our ruler. The marriage has been arranged to bring peace. Our two

warring planets now possess the capability of mutual destruction. Some method of coexistence had to be found."

"Then we return to Troyius?"

"Yes. But slowly, Captain. I will need time. My mission is to teach her civilized manners before we reach Troyius. It must be clear to you now why I'll need time. In her present savage condition my people would never accept her as queen."

"You've got yourself quite a mission," Kirk said.

"Those are my orders. I must ask you and your crew to tolerate this Elasian impudence for the sake of future peace. It is vital that friction now be kept to a minimum."

"That I can understand," Kirk said.

"There's another thing you should understand, Captain. You have as much at stake as I have. Your superiors know that failure of this mission would be as catastrophic for Federation planning as it would be for our two planets. The peace we'd gain by accepting such an untutored wife for our ruler would not be peace." He drew a deep sighing breath. "I will take her the official gifts I bear. Perhaps they will change her mood."

Kirk said, "I hope so." But what he thought was: "Shrew, termagant—a knockout fishwife is what I've got on my ship!"

Troubled, he stopped at Sulu's station as he re-entered the bridge. "Mr Sulu, lay in a course for Troyius. Impulse drive-speed factor point zero three seven. Take us out of orbit."

Sulu looked startled. "Impulse drive, Captain?"

"That is correct, Mr Sulu. Sub-light factor point zero three seven."

Scott looked up from his station. "Captain, you'll not be using the warp drive? All the way on impulse?"

"Correct, Mr Scott."

"That'll take a great deal of time."

"Are you in a hurry, Mr Scott?"

"No, sir."

"That's it, then." But he'd scarcely reached his command chair when Spock hurried to his side. "Captain, the Dohlman is dissatisfied with her quarters!"

Overhearing, Uhura turned indignantly. "What's the matter with them?"

"Nothing that I was able to see," Spock said. "But all the Elasians seem to be most irrational."

"I gave up my quarters," Uhura said, "because—"

"*I* appreciate your sacrifice, Lieutenant," Kirk told her. He got up. "I'll talk to the lady myself."

He heard the screams of rage before he reached Uhura's cabin. Its door was wide open. But it took a moment to take in the scene. A crystal box was flying through the air—and struck Petri in the chest. "Swine! Take back your gifts! Your ruler cannot buy the favor of the Dohlman of Elas!"

Petri retrieved the box, stuffing delicate lace back into it. "Your glory," he said, "this is your wedding veil." He backed up to what he clearly hoped was a safe distance to raise the lid of a begemmed gold casket. "In this," he said, "are the most prized royal jewels of Troyius. This necklace is a gift from the bridegroom's mother to adorn your lovely throat…"

The necklace seemed to be composed of diamonds and emeralds. Elaan seized it. Then she hurled it at Petri with a wild aim that barely escaped hitting Kirk in the face. "I would strangle if I wore this bauble of Troyian dogs around my neck!"

Kirk stepped over the glitter at his feet and into the cabin. She saw him and shrieked, "Kryton!" The huge guard rushed in. "By whose permission has *he* come here?"

"He came in answer to your summons, your glory."

Kirk said, "I understand you are not happy with your quarters."

She waved a hand, dismissing Kryton. "Quarters?" She leveled a perfect leg at a cushioned chair. "Am I a soft, pewling Troyian that I must have cushions to sit on?" She kicked the chair over. Her own action inflamed her rage. She ran to the cabin window, ripping down its draperies. "These female trappings in here are an offense to me!"

Kirk said, "My Communications Officer vacated these rooms in the generous hope you would find them satisfactory."

"I do not find them so." She pointed at Petri. "And I find this—this Ambassador even less satisfactory! Must my bitterness be compounded by his presence aboard your ship?"

Petri, red with suppressed fury, said, "I've explained to her glory that her Council of Nobles and the Troyian Tribunal jointly agreed that I should instruct—make her acquainted with the customs and manners of our people."

"Kryton!" Elaan called. She indicated Petri. "Remove him!" The guard fingered his weapon. Petri bowed; and was moving to the door when she cried, "And take that garbage with you!" He bowed

again, stooped lower to collect the gifts she'd flung to the floor and gratefully made his exit.

"That he should dare to suggest I adopt the servile manners of his people!" Elaan stormed.

"Your glory doesn't seem to be responding favorably to Troyian instruction," Kirk said.

"I will never forgive the Council of Nobles for inflicting such a nightmare on me! By the way, *you* were responding to my demand for better quarters!"

"There are none better aboard," Kirk said. "I suggest you make the best of it."

Aghast at this effrontery, she glanced at Uhura's dressing table for some object she could smash. "You presume to suggest to *me* —"

Kirk said, "Lieutenant Uhura's personal belongings have all been removed from the cabin. But if smashing things gratifies you, I will arrange to equip it with breakable articles."

"I will not be humiliated!"

"Then behave yourself," Kirk said. He went to the door; and she screamed, "I did not give you permission to leave!"

"I didn't ask for it," he said, slamming the door behind him.

An agitated Petri was waiting for him in the corridor. "Captain, I wish to contact my government. I cannot fulfill my mission. I would be an insult to my ruler to bring him this incorrigible monster as a bride."

"Simmer down, Ambassador. Your mission is a peace mission."

"There cannot be peace between the Elasians and us. We have deluded ourselves. The truth is, when I am with these people, I do not want peace. I want to kill them."

"Then you're as bad as she is," Kirk said. "You're not obliged to like the Elasians. You're obliged to do a job."

"The job's impossible. She simply won't listen to me."

"*Make* her listen," Kirk said. "Don't be so diplomatic. She respects strength. Come on strong with her, Ambassador."

"I, too, have pride, Captain. I will not be humiliated."

"You're on assignment, Ambassador. So am I. We're under orders to deliver the Dohlman in acceptable condition for this marriage. If it means swallowing a bit of our pride—well, that's part of the job."

Petri sighed. "Very well. I'll make another try."

"Strong, Ambassador. Remember, come on strong with her. Good luck."

A knockout fishwife. What she needed was a swift one to her lovely jaw. Kirk, re-entering the bridge was greeted by Uhura's hopeful question: "Does she like my quarters any better now, Captain?"

"She's made certain… arrangements, Lieutenant. But I think things will work out."

The intercom spoke excitedly. "Security alert! Deck five! Security alert!"

Kirk ran for the elevator. On deck five, Security Officer Evans met him as he stepped out. "It's Ambassador Petri, sir. They refuse to explain what happened but—"

At the door to Elaan's quarters, two *Enterprise* security men were confronting the three Elasian guards. "Stand aside, please," Kirk said to Kryton.

The ape-jawed giant said, "Her glory has not summoned you."

Behind him Elaan opened the closed door. "Have this Troyian pig removed," she said.

Petri lay on the cabin floor, face down in a pool of his own blood. The jeweled dagger had been buried in his back.

In Sickbay McCoy looked up at Kirk. "The knife went deep, Jim. He's lost a lot of blood."

Kirk bent over the patient. What he received was a glare. "If I recover," Petri said weakly, "it will be no thanks to you."

"I said talk to her. Not fight her."

"I should have known better than to enter that cabin, unarmed. But you forced me to. I hold you responsible for this."

"Captain!" It was Uhura. "A message from Star-fleet Command just in. Class A security, scrambled. I've just put it through the decoder."

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"The Federation's High Commissioner is on his way to Troyius for the royal wedding."

McCoy whistled. "Whew! Now the fat's really in the fire. When the Commissioner learns the bride has just tried to murder the groom's Ambassador…"

"What a comfort you are, Bones!" But McCoy had returned to the patient whom Nurse Christine was preparing for an air hypo. As she applied it, she said, "If the Elasian women are this vicious, sir, why are men so attracted to them? What is their magic?"

"It's not magic," Petri said scornfully. "It's biochemical—a chemical substance in their tears. A man whose flesh is once touched by an Elasian woman's tears is made her slave forever."

"What rot!" Kirk thought. "The man's a fool." The failure of his mission was about to be exposed to the Federation's High Commissioner—and here he was going on about Elasian females' tears. He walked over to the bed. "Ambassador, I have news for you. The Federation's High Commissioner is on his way to this wedding."

"There will be no wedding. I would not have our ruler marry that creature if the entire galaxy depended on it. And I want nothing more to do with you."

"I didn't ask you to have anything to do with me. I asked you to do your job with her." He turned to McCoy. "Bones, how long will it take to get him back on his feet?"

"A few days. Maybe a week."

Petri raised his head from his pillow. "Captain, in this bed you put me. And in this bed I intend to stay. Indefinitely. I have nothing further to say to you."

Kirk looked at McCoy. Then he shrugged. Uhura and McCoy followed him out to the corridor. "I don't know what to do with him, Jim. He's as bad as she is. They're all pig-headed. And they just plain hate each other."

Uhura said, "You've got to admit he's got the better reason for hate. Captain, can't you explain to the High Commissioner that it's just impossible to—"

"High Commissioners don't like explanations. They like results. How do you handle a woman like that, anyway?"

"You stay away from her, Captain. As far away as—"

She broke off. From the recreation room they were passing came the sound of poignantly haunting music. Uhura's face lighted. "Captain, it used to be said that music hath charms to soothe the savage breast. The Dohlman has a very savage breast. Suppose you—"

"Soothing that woman is asking a lot of any music," McCoy said.

But Kirk was looking reflectively at the recreation room door. He opened it. Spock, sitting apart from the other crew members, was strumming his Vulcan lyre. Its unearthly tones suited the room

decorations—its carpet of pink grass, wall vines that broke into drooping, long-stamened blossoms, the fountain spraying purple water into the air.

"Spock, what's that music you're playing?"

"A simple scale. I was just tuning the lyre."

"You can play tunes on that contraption?" McCoy said.

"I took second prize in the all-Vulcan music competition."

"Who took the first one?"

"My father."

"Can you play a love song?" Kirk said.

"A mating song. In ancient times the Vulcan lyre was used to stimulate the mating passion."

"We need some form of such stimulation on this ship," Kirk said. "A mating on Troyius is supposed to take place if we could just persuade the bride to participate in it."

"Inasmuch as she's just knifed her teacher in the bridegroom's etiquette, teaching it to her seems something of a baffler," McCoy said.

"Appoint another teacher," Spock said.

"You, Spock?"

"Certainly not. Logic dictates that the Dohlman will accept only the person of highest rank aboard this vessel."

Everybody looked at Kirk. He looked back at them, considering all the elements involved in Elaan's capitulation to reason.

"All right. Spock, give me five minutes and then start piping that music of yours into the Dohlman's quarters." He left; and as Spock's fingers moved over the strings of his instrument, Uhura sighed. "Mr Spock, that music really gets to me."

"Yes, I also find it relaxing."

"Relaxing is the very last word I'd use to describe it," Uhura said. "I'd certainly like to learn how to play that lyre."

"I'd be glad to give you the theory, Lieutenant. However, to my knowledge no non-Vulcan has ever mastered the skill."

In Elaan's cabin Kirk was wishing he could give her the theory of acceptable table manners.

He watched her lift a wine bottle from her sumptuously spread dinner table, take a swig from it and wipe her mouth with a lovely arm. She swallowed, and replacing the bottle on the table, said, "So the Ambassador will recover. That's too bad." Then she grabbed a roasted squab from a plate. She bit a mouthful of

breast meat from it; and tossing the rest of the delicacy over her shoulder, added, "You've delivered your message. You have my leave to go."

He was fascinated by the efficiency with which she managed to articulate and chew squab at the same time. "I'd like nothing better," he said. "But your glory's impetuous nature has—"

"That Troyian pig was in my quarters without permission. Naturally I stabbed him."

Kirk said, "You Elasians pride yourselves on being a warrior race. Then you must understand discipline—the ability to follow orders as well as to give them. You are under orders to marry the Troyian ruler and familiarize yourself with the habits of his people."

"Troyians disgust me," she said. "Any contact with them makes me feel soiled."

Her cheek was soiled by a large spot of grease from the squab. "It's my experience," Kirk said, "that the prejudices people feel disappear once they get to know each other."

Spock's music had begun to filter into the cabin. "That has not been my experience," she said, reaching for a rich cream pastry.

"In any case, we're still faced with a problem."

"Problem?"

"Your indoctrination in the customs of Troyius."

"I have eliminated that problem."

"No. You eliminated your teacher. The problem remains."

The luscious mouth smiled grimly. How, he couldn't figure out. "And its solution?" she said.

"A new teacher."

"Oh." She placed her dagger on the table. "What's that sickening sound?" The pastry in her hand, she rose, went to the intercom and switched off the Vulcan music. Licking cream from the pastry, she said, "And you—what can you teach me?"

"Table manners for one thing," he said.

He picked up a napkin, went to her, removed the pastry; and wiped her mouth, her cheek and fingers. "This," he said, "is a table napkin. Its function is to remove traces of the wine and food one has swallowed instead of leaving them on the mouth, the cheek, the fingers—and oh yes, the arm." He wiped her arm. Then, grasping it firmly, he led her over to the table.

"And this," he said, "is a plate. It holds food. It is specifically made to hold food, as floors are not. They are constructed to walk on." He poured wine into a glass; and held it up. "This is a glass,"

he said, "the vessel from which one drinks wine. A bottle, your glory, is merely intended to hold the wine."

She seized the bottle and took another swig from it. "Leave me," she said.

"You are going to learn what you've been ordered to learn," he said.

"You will return me to Elas at once!"

"That is impossible."

She stamped her foot. "What I command is always possible! I will not go to Troyius! I will not be given to a fat pig of a Troyian as a bride to stop a war!" She lifted the wine bottle again to her mouth. Kirk grabbed it.

"You enjoy the title of Dohlman," he said. "If you don't want the obligations that go with it, give it up!"

Her shock was genuine. "Nobody has ever dared to speak to me in such a manner!"

"That's your trouble," he said. "Nobody has ever told you the truth. You are an uncivilized little savage, a vicious, bad-tempered child in a woman's body…"

Her fist leaped out and connected with Kirk's jaw. She had pulled her arm back to strike him again when he grabbed it and slapped her as hard as he could across the face. The blow sent her sprawling back on the bed. Shaking with rage, Kirk shouted, "You've heard the truth from me for the first time in your spoiled life!"

He made for the door—and her dagger hissed past his ear to stick, quivering, in a wall plaque beside his head. He pulled it free; and tossing it back to her, said, "Tomorrow's lesson, your glory, will be on courtesy."

As he jerked the door closed behind him, she yanked wildly at the table cover. He didn't turn at the sound of crashing crockery.

He got out of the bridge elevator to see Spock absorbed in his sensor viewer. "Captain, look at this. At first I defined it as a sensor ghost. But I've run checks on all the instrumentation. The equipment is working perfectly."

Kirk examined the shadow. "Hydrogen cloud reflection?"

"None in the area. The ghost appears intermittently."

"Speculation, Mr Spock?"

"None, sir. Insufficient data."

"It's not an instrument malfunction, not a reflection of natural phenomena. A space ship, then?"

The intercom beeped. Scott's voice was thick with anger.

"Captain, must I let these—these passengers fool around with my equipment? I know what you said about showing them respect but…"

"Hang on, Scotty. And be pleasant no matter how it hurts. I'm on my way."

He was startled himself when he opened the door to Engineering. Elaan and her three guards had their heads bent over the warp-drive mechanism. Scott had somehow got his fury under control. He was saying, "I suppose, ma'am, that even our impulse drive must seem fast—"

"We are interested in how ships are used in combat, not in what drives them. Engines are for mechanics and other menials."

Scott choked. "Menials? How long do you think—"

"Mr Scott!" Kirk said sharply.

He strode to Elaan. "Why didn't you tell me you wanted a tour of the engine room?"

"Do I not own the freedom of this ship? I have granted your men permission not to kneel in my presence. What more do you want?"

"Courtesy."

"Courtesy is not for inferiors."

Kirk said, "Mr Scott, our chief engineer has received you into his department. That was a courtesy. You will respond to it by saying, "Thank you, Mr Scott.'"

He thought she was going to spit at him. Then she said tightly, "Thank you, Mr Scott." Her guards stared, dumbfounded. She pushed one. "Come," she said to them and swept out.

Scott said, "Your schooling, sir, seems to be taking effect."

A buzz came from the intercom beside them. Spock's voice said, "Bridge to Captain."

"Kirk here."

"That sensor ghost is moving closer, sir."

"On my way."

His guess had been right. The sensor ghost was a space ship. Kirk studied the instrument for a long moment. Then he raised his head. "The question is, Mr Spock, whose space ship is it?"

"No data yet, sir."

"Captain!" Sulu called. "A distant bearing, sir. Mark 73.5."

"Maximum magnification," Kirk said.

The main viewing screen had been merely showing a telescopic blur of a normally stationary star field. Now there suddenly swam into it the sharp image of an unfamiliar but strangely evil-looking space ship.

"Our ghost has materialized, Captain," Spock said.

Kirk nodded soberly. "A Klingon warship."

He returned to his command chair, the gravity in his face deepened. He turned to look at the screen again. "Any change, Mr Spock?"

"Negative, sir. The Klingon ship has simply moved into contact range. She's pacing us, precisely matching our sub-light speed."

Though the bridge screen was equipped to show what was moving outside the *Enterprise,* it was not equipped to show what was moving inside it. Thus, Kirk could not see Kryton move stealthily into the engineering room—and take cover behind the huge mount where Second Engineer Watson was working. In perfect secrecy, the Elasian silently removed the main relay box cover, took a small dial-studded disk from his uniform pouch, adjusted the dials and placed the disk in the relay box. It was as he fitted it that Watson sensed something amiss. Tool in hand, he confronted Kryton, shouting, "What are you doing in here?"

Kryton's fist came up under his chin like a uncoiled spring. Watson crumpled. In a flash, Kryton had the body hidden and huddled behind the mount. Then he went back to work in the relay box.

In the bridge, Kirk, still concentrated on the Klingon ship's doings, turned to Uhura. "Lieutenant, open a hailing frequency. Identify us and ask his intentions."

She plugged into her board, shook her head. "No response, sir. Not on any channel."

"Then continue to monitor all frequencies, Lieutenant." He paused a moment. Then he said to Sulu, "Phaser crews stand by, Mr Sulu." He waited another moment before he added "Maintain yellow alert." He rose from his chair. "Mr Spock, it's time."

Down in Engineering, still unknown, unheard, Kryton's disk made contact. The lights in the matter-antimatter grille flickered before they returned to full strength. Kirk, on deck five, was walking down the corridor to Elaan's cabin. As he'd expected, two guards stood at her door. But neither was Kryton. A little uneasy he said, "Where is Kryton?"

"On business," said a guard. Both lifted their weapons. "No one may enter the Dohlman's presence," one said.

"Inform her glory that Captain Kirk requests the honor of a visit."

"The Dohlman has said I shall be whipped to death if I let Captain Kirk pass through this door." Kirk pushed past them. The weapons leveled. A beam flashed twice. The guards fell; and Spock, phaser in hand, came out of the opposite door. "Have them taken to the Security Holding area, Mr Spock."

Spock said, "Captain, how did you anticipate that she would deny you admittance? The logic by which you arrived at your conclusion escapes me."

"On your planet, Mr Spock, females are logical. No other planet in the galaxy can make that claim."

He opened Elaan's door to see her sitting before a mirror. She was absorbed in combing the shining hair. As she saw his reflection in the glass, she flew to the bed where she'd discarded her belted dagger. Holding it high, she rushed at Kirk, its point at his heart. He seized her wrist and she shrieked, "You dare to touch a member of the royal family of Elas?"

"In self-defense, I certainly do." He removed the dagger and she tried to rake his face with her nails. He closed with her, holding her arms immobilized.

"For what you are doing the penalty is death on Elas!"

"You're not on Elas now. You are on my ship. I command here."

She bit bis arm. The pain took him off guard. His hold on her loosened—and she was gone, fled into the adjoining bathroom, its door clicking locked behind her.

"That's your warning, Captain!" she called through it. "Don't ever touch me again!"

"All right," Kirk shouted in answer. "Then I'll send in Mr Spock or Dr McCoy! But I'll tell you one thing! You're going to do what you've been ordered to do by Councils, Tribunals and bureaucrats…"

He'd had it. A Klingon warship in the offing—and here he was, stuck behind a bathroom door trying to make sense to an overindulged brat who had no sense. "I'm leaving!" he yelled. "I'm through with you!"

She opened the door. "Captain…" She hesitated. "There… is one thing you… can teach me…"

"No, there isn't!" he roared at her. "You were right the first time! There's nothing I want to teach you! Not any more! You know everything!"

She began to cry. "I don't know everything. I don't know how to make people like me. Everybody hates me…"

He was startled into contrition. Genuine tears flooded the dark eyes. It was a sight he'd never thought to see. "Now look…" he said. "It's not that anybody hates you…"

"Yes, they do," she sobbed. "Everybody does…"

He went to her and wiped the tear-wet cheeks with his hand. "Stop crying," he said. "It's just that nobody likes to be treated as though they didn't exist…"

He was suddenly conscious of heat. "Something's wrong with the ventilation of this room… I—I need some air… we'll have a short recess, your glory."

"Captain…" He turned from the door. The luscious mouth was smiling at him, the pearl-toned arms outstretched to him. He stared at her for a long moment. Then he went straight into the arms. He kissed her—and the world, the Klingon ship, the High Commissioner, all he'd ever known in his life before was as though it had never existed.

She whispered, "You… slapped me."

Unsteadily, Kirk said, "We'll… talk about it later…"

His mouth found hers again.

Uhura, checking her dials, pushed the intercom button.

"Bridge to Captain," she said. She glanced over at 'Spock. "Mr Spock, I'm getting—"

"I have it on my sensor," Spock said.

"Bridge to Captain," she repeated, frowning. "Come in, Captain. Captain Kirk, please answer."

Kirk's voice came, unfamiliar, dazed. "Kirk here."

"Captain, I'm picking up a transmission from inside the *Enterprise.* It's on a tight beam aimed at the Klingon vessel."

Elaan was nibbling at the lobe of Kirk's ear. "Transmission?" he echoed vaguely. Her lashes were black. They should have been silver blonde but they weren't. He said, "Stop that." She kissed the ear; and he was able to focus his attention on the intercom long

enough to ask, "Can you pinpoint the source of the transmission, Lieutenant?"

"Spock here, Captain. I am triangulating now. It's coming from the engine room, sir."

The news broke through his entrancement. "Security to engineering! An intruder! Security alert all decks!"

He ran for the door and the elevator. In the engine room, Scott met him, his face stricken. He pointed to the body of Watson. "Watson must have discovered the devil after he'd sneaked in here. He got killed for it. He had this in his hand when I found him. It looks like some kind of transmitter."

Kirk took it. "It's Klingon," he said.

McCoy rose from Watson's body. "Neck snapped clean, Jim."

Kirk walked over to where two Security guards, their phasers trained on Kryton, held the ape-jawed Elasian in custody.

"What signal did you send that Klingon ship? What was your assignment?"

Impassive, his small eyes bright with scorn, Kryton said, "Captain, you must know I will say nothing. Our interrogation methods are far more excruciating than anything you people are capable of."

"I'm aware you're trained to resist any form of *physical* torture." Kirk moved to the intercom. "Kirk to Spock."

"Spock here, Captain."

"Mr Spock, it is Kryton who's been transmitting. He refuses to talk. I'll need you to do the Vulcan mind-meld."

"Captain!" It was Evans, one of the Security guards. "The prisoner—he's sick…" Kirk whirled to see Kryton clutch at his stomach. The Elasian sagged at the knees—and his hand whipped out to seize Evans' phaser. He reversed it, fired it at himself and disappeared.

Stunned, Evans said, "Captain, I'm sorry. But he really seemed —"

"What was he hiding that was so important he had to die to keep it secret?" Hard-faced, Kirk turned to Scott. "He didn't come in here just to use a transmitter. Scotty, I want you to check every relay you've got."

"Captain, do you realize how many relays there are in Engineering?"

"Don't waste time telling me. Do it!" He wasted no time himself in getting back to Elaan's cabin. She took the news of Kryton's

suicide quietly. "He's been half out of his mind ever since the announcement of my wedding. He was of noble family—and he loved me."

"Then he sold out to the Klingons out of jealousy?"

"Probably." She laid her hand on his heart. "It is mine, is it not? Let us not speak of unimportant matters."

"There's a Klingon warship out there," he told her. "What is it there for? It isn't keeping pace with us just to prevent your marriage."

She put her silver blonde head on his shoulder. "We should welcome their help against the marriage," she said.

He grasped her upper arms. "Elaan, two planets, the stability of an entire star system depends on your marriage. We both have a duty to forget what happened."

"Could you do that? Give me to another man?"

"My orders—and yours—say you *belong* to that other man. What happened between us was an accident."

"It was no accident. I chose you and you chose me." Before he could speak, she added, "I have a plan. With this ship you could utterly obliterate Troyius. Then there would be no need for the marriage. Our grateful people would give you command of the star system."

He stared at her in horror. "How can you think of such a monstrous thing?"

"He is Troyian," she said. And was in his arms again. "You cannot fight against this love… against my love."

"Captain!" It was Spock on the intercom. There was a pause before he said, "May we see you a moment?"

Kirk didn't answer. The witch in his arms was right. He could not fight against this love, this passion, this fatality—whatever it was, whatever name one chose to give it. Nameless or named, it held him in thrall. His lips were on hers again—and the door opened. Spock and McCoy stood there, staring in unbelief.

"Jim!"

Kirk raised unseeing eyes.

"*Jim!* May I have a word with you, please?"

Kirk pulled free of the clinging arms; and moved toward the door with the slow, ponderous walk of a man walking under water. He looked back at Elaan. Then he stumbled out into the corridor.

"Captain, are you all right?" Spock said.

He nodded.

"Jim, did she cry?"

"What?"

"Did she cry? Did her tears touch your skin?"

Kirk frowned. "Yes."

McCoy sighed. "Then we're in trouble. Jim, listen to me. Petri told Christine that Elasian women's tears contain a biochemical substance that acts like a super, grade A love potion."

Kirk was staring at the hand that had wiped the tears from Elaan's cheek. "And according to Petri, the effects don't wear off," McCoy said.

"Bones, you've got to find me an antidote."

"I can try but I'll need to make tests of—"

The corridor intercom spoke. "Bridge to Captain!"

"Kirk here."

Sulu's anxious voice said, "Captain, the Klingon ship has changed course! It's heading toward us at warp speed!"

All look of bemusement left Kirk's face. "Battle stations!" he ordered crisply. "I'm on my way."

Klaxon alarm shrieks filled the bridge as he stepped from the elevator. A fast glance at the screen showed the swiftly enlarging image of the Klingon ship. "Stand by, phasers!" he ordered, running to his command chair.

"Phasers ready, sir," Sulu reported. Spock called, "His speed is better than Warp Six, Captain!"

Eyes on the screen, Kirk said, "Mr Chekov, lay in a course to take us clear of this system. If he wants to fight, we'll need room to maneuver."

"Course computed, sir," Chekov said. "And laid in, Captain."

"Very well, Mr Sulu. Ahead, Warp Two and—" The intercom beeped to the sound of Scott's agitated voice. "Captain! The matter-anti-matter reactor is—"

Before Scott had uttered the next word, Kirk had barked, "Belay that order, Mr Sulu!"

Sulu jerked his hand from the button he was about to push as though it were red-hot. Spock left his station to come and stand beside Kirk. "What is it, Scotty?"

Everyone on the bridge could hear Scott say, "The anti-matter pod is rigged to blow up the moment we go into warp drive."

Moments went by before Kirk spoke. Then he said, "That bomb he planted, Scotty. Can you dismantle it?"

"Not without blowing us halfway across the galaxy."

Like a blow Kirk could feel the pressure of the eyes focussed on him. He drew a deep breath. "Then give us every ounce of power you've got from the impulse drive. And find a solution to that bomb."

It was into this atmosphere of repressed excitement that Elaan stepped from the bridge elevator. On the screen the Klingon ship was growing in size and detail. "Mr Sulu, stand by to make your maneuvers smartly. She'll be sluggish in response."

Kirk turned back to the screen and saw Elaan. Absorbed though he was in crisis, he had to fight the impulse to go to her by grasping the arms of his chair, Spock moved closer to him; and Sulu said tonelessly, "One hundred thousand kilometers."

Time ambled by. Then Sulu said, "Ninety kilometers."

"Hold your fire," Kirk said.

Sulu moistened his lips. "Sixty. Fifty."

On the screen the Klingon ship blurred in a burst of speed. "She's passed us without firing a shot," Sulu said very quietly.

"Captain, I don't think they meant to attack us," Spock said. Now that the crisis had passed, Kirk was conscious again only of the presence of Elaan. He rose from his chair as though pulled to her by an invisible chain. Watchful, Spock said warningly, "*This* time we have been fortunate."

The invisible chain snapped. Kirk sank back in his chair. "Yes, their tactics are clear now. They were trying to tempt us to cut in warp drive. That way we'd have blown ourselves up. Their problem would have been solved for them without risking war with the Federation. Very neat."

"Very," Spock said. "But why do they consider the possession of this system so vital?"

"A very good question, Mr Spock."

"I have another question, sir. Isn't the bridge the wrong place for the Dohlman to be at a time like this?"

"I'll be the judge of—" Kirk began. He met Spock's eyes. "You're right, Mr Spock. Thank you."

He strode over to Elaan. "I want you to leave the bridge and go to Sickbay. It's the best-protected part of the ship."

"I want to be with you," she said.

"Your presence here is interfering with my efficiency—my ability to protect you."

"I won't go."

Gripping her shoulders, he propelled her toward the elevator. Over her head, he looked at Spock. "You have the con, Mr Spock."

As the elevator door slid closed, she flung her arms about his neck. "I love you. I have chosen you. But I do not understand why you did not fight the Klingon."

"If I can do better by my mission by running away, then I run away."

"That mission," she said, "is to deliver me to Troyius."

"Yes, it is," he said.

"You would have me wear my wedding dress for another man and never see me again?"

"Yes, Elaan."

"Are you happy at that prospect?"

"No."

The intercom buzzed. "Scott to Captain."

"Kirk here."

"Bad news, Skipper. The entire dilythium crystal converter assembly is fused. No chance of repair. It's completely unusable."

"No way to restore warp drive?"

"Not without the dilythium crystal, sir. We can't even generate enough power to fire our weapons."

"Elaan, I've got to get back to the bridge. *Please* go to Sickbay. There's its door. Down this corridor."

She stood on tiptoe to kiss his forehead. "Yes, my brave love."

He watched her move down to the Sickbay door. Whatever chemical substance it was in the tears he had wiped from her cheek, it was powerful stuff.

Mysteriously baffling was how McCoy was finding it. Twenty-four tests—and analysis of it was as elusive as ever.

Petri watched him examine a read-out handed him by Nurse Christine. "You're wasting your time," he said. "There is no antidote to the poison of Elasian tears. The men of Elas have tried desperately to locate one. They've always failed." He had leaned back against his pillow when Elaan opened the Sickbay door. She addressed McCoy. "The Captain asked me to come here for safety."

Petri raised his head again. "And our safety? What about that with this woman around? How do you estimate our chances for

survival, Dr McCoy?"

"That's the Captain's responsibility," McCoy said.

Petri looked soberly thoughtful. After a long moment, he reached down into the gold casket he'd placed under his bed and withdrew the necklace Elaan had rejected. He pulled on his robe and walked slowly over to her.

"I have failed in my responsibility to my people," he said heavily. "With more wisdom I might have been able to prepare you to marry our ruler. Now that we may all die, I again ask you to accept this necklace as a token of respect for the true wish of my—of our people—for peace between us."

"Responsibility, duty—that's all you men ever think about!" she said angrily.

But she took the necklace.

When Kirk got back to the bridge, it was for more bad news. It was Uhura who had to give it to him. "A message from the Klingon ship, sir. We are ordered to stand by for boarding or be destroyed. They demand an immediate reply."

"So he's going to force a fight," Kirk said.

Back in his command chair, he struck his intercom button. "Kirk to Engineering. Energy status, Scotty?"

"Ninety-three percent of impulse power, Captain."

"We can still maneuver, sir," Spock said.

"Aye, we can wallow like a garbage scow," Scott said. "Our shields will hold out for a few passes. But without the matter-anti-matter reactors, we've no chance against a starship. Captain, can't you call Starfleet in *this* emergency?"

"And tell the Klingons they've succeeded in knocking out the warp engines?" Kirk retorted. "No, we'll stall for time."

He swung around to confront the taut faces in the bridge. "We will proceed," he said, "on course; in hope that the Klingons can be bluffed—or think better of starting a general war. Lieutenant Uhura, open a hailing frequency."

He seized his speaker. "This is Captain James Kirk of the *USS Enterprise* on Federation business. Our mission is peaceful but we are not prepared to accept interference."

The hoarse Klingon voice filled the bridge. "Prepare to be boarded or destroyed."

"Very effective, our strategy," Kirk muttered.

"Captain, the Klingon is closing in on an intercept course!" Sulu exclaimed. "Five hundred thousand kilometers." He added, "Deflector shields up!"

It was the moment Elaan chose to step out of the bridge elevator, radiant in the shimmering white of her wedding dress, the Troyian necklace of pellucid jewels around her neck. Kirk tore his eyes from the vision she made—and hit the intercom with his fist. "Mr Scott, can you deliver even partial power to the main phaser banks?"

"No, sir. Not a chance."

Elaan was beside Kirk. Averting his eyes from her, he said, "I told you to stay in Sickbay."

"If I'm going to die, I want to die with you."

"We don't intend to die. Leave the bridge."

She drifted away toward the elevator and stopped to lean her head back against the wall.

Sulu shouted, "One thousand kilometers!"—and the ship shuddered under impact by a Klingon missile. As it burst against a deflector shield, its flash bathed the *Enterprise* in a multi-colored auroral light.

"He's passed us," Spock said. "All shields held."

"Mr Sulu, come to 143 mark 2. Keep our forward shields to him."

"Here he comes again, sir," Sulu said.

"Stay with the controls. Keep those forward shields to him." On the screen the Klingon ship was an approaching streak of speed.

"He's going for our flank, Mr Sulu. Hard over! Bring her around!"

The force of the second missile shook every chair in the bridge. "Sulu!" Kirk shouted.

"Sorry, Captain. She won't respond fast enough on impulse drive."

"He's passed us again," Spock said. "There's damage to number four shield, sir."

"How bad?"

"It won't take another full strike. Captain, I'm getting some very peculiar readings on the sensor board."

"What sort of readings, Mr Spock?"

The Vulcan had seized his tricorder and was scanning the bridge area with it. Suddenly, he leaped from his chair to point to Elaan. "*She* is the source!" he cried.

"She?" Kirk said. "You mean Elaan?"

"The necklace, Captain!"

Both men ran to her. "What kind of jewels are in that thing?" Kirk demanded.

Bewildered, she fingered the necklace. "We call the white beads radans. They are quite common stones."

Spock scanned the diamonds with a circular device on his tricorder. Under it, they glowed and sparkled with an unearthly fire.

"It's only because of its antiquity that the necklace is prized," Elaan said.

"Common stones!" Kirk said. "No wonder the Klingons are interested in this star system! May I have that necklace, your glory?"

"If it can be of any help—of course," she said.

"You may just have saved our lives," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, do you think Scotty could use some dilythium crystals?"

"There's a highly positive element in your supposition, Captain." The necklace in hand, Spock entered the elevator.

"He's coming in again, sir," Sulu cried.

"Mr Sulu, stand by my order to turn *quickly* to port. Try to protect number four shield. *Now,* Mr Sulu! Hard to port!"

Again the shields reflected the brilliant interplay of multi-colored light as the ship vibrated under shock by the Klingon attack. "Shields holding but weakened," Sulu called.

"Captain, message coming in," Uhura reported. At Kirk's nod, she hit the speaker.

The guttural Klingon voice had triumph in it. "*Enterprise,* our readings confirm your power extremely low, your shields buckling. This is your last chance to surrender."

Sulu said, "Number four shield just collapsed, sir. Impulse power down to 31 percent."

Kirk walked over to Uhura's station. "Lieutenant, open a channel." He seized the microphone. "This is Captain Kirk. I request your terms of surrender."

"No terms. Surrender must be unconditional and immediate."

Kirk struck the intercom button. "Scotty, what's the estimate?"

"We're fitting it now, sir. We'll need to run a few tests to make sure—"

"We'll test it in combat."

Spock said, "Those are crude crystals, sir. There's no way to judge what the unusual shapes will do to energy flow."

Scott used the intercom to add his caution. "Captain, a hitch in the energy flow could blow us up just as effectively as—"

Kirk cut him off. "Let me know when it's in place." He returned to Uhura. "Hailing frequency again, Lieutenant." Back at his command chair, he said into his speaker, "This is the *USS Enterprise.* Will you guarantee the safety of our passenger, the Dohlman of Elas?"

The harsh voice repeated, "No conditions. Surrender immediate."

"Captain, he's starting his run!"

"I see, Mr Sura." Standing before the screen, Kirk felt a quiet hand laid on his arm. Elaan watched with him as death in the form of the Klingon ship neared them, itself a black missile made vague by speed. Then Scott spoke from the intercom. "It's in place, sir—but I can't answer for…"

"Get up here fast!" Kirk said. He wheeled from the screen. "Mr Sulu, stand by for warp maneuver. Mr Chekov, arm photon torpedoes."

"Photon torpedoes ready, sir."

"Warp power to the shields, Captain?"

"Negative, Mr Sulu. His sensors would pick up our power increase. The more helpless he thinks we are, the closer he'll come. It's as he passes I want warp drive cut in. You'll pivot at Warp Two, Mr Sulu, to bring all tubes to bear."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr Chekov, give him the full spread of photon torpedoes."

Scott rushed into the bridge to take his place at his station and Sulu said, "One hundred thousand kilometers, sir."

"Mr Scott, stand by to cut in warp power."

The engineer looked up from his control. "Fluctuation, Captain. It's the shape of the crystals. I was afraid of that."

"Seventy-five kilometers," Sulu said.

"He'll fire at minimum range, Mr Sulu."

"Forty," Sulu said.

Scott's worried eyes were on the flickering lights of his board. "It won't steady down, Captain."

The mass of the Klingon ship nearly filled the screen. Kirk said, "Warp in, Scotty. Full power to the shields. Mr Sulu, warp two.

Come to course 147 mark 3."

The Klingon ship fired. The *Enterprise* swerved, began to rotate dizzily in the dazzle of the now familiar auroral blaze reflected from its wounded shields.

"We're still here!" Scott cried, unbelieving.

"Fire photon torpedoes! Full spread!"

They waited. Elaan's hand found Kirk's. Then it came. From far out in space there came the shattering roar of explosion, of tearing metal. Another one detonated.

"Direct hit amidship by photon torpedo!" Sulu yelled.

Spock lifted his head. "Damage to Klingon number three shield, Captain. Number four obliterated. They've lost maneuver power, sir."

Chekov turned. "He's badly damaged. Retreating at reduced speed, sir."

"Secure from general quarters," Kirk said.

Elaan, her eyes shining with proud excitement, looked at him, startled. "You will not pursue and finish him off?"

"No." His eyes met hers. It was a long moment be-fore he was able to say, "Mr Sulu, resume course to Troyius."

Having said it, he looked away from the dead hope in her face.

In the Transporter Room, Petri had taken his place on the platform. As Elaan entered in her wedding dress, she touched the Troyian necklace she wore and smiled at him. "The two missing stones in this," she said, "saved all our lives, Ambassador Petri." He bowed deeply.

She went to Kirk. "You will beam-down for—the ceremony?"

"No."

She detached the jeweled dagger from her belt. "I wish you to have this as a personal memento. You have taught me that such things are no longer for me." She stooped and kissed his hand. "Remember me," she whispered.

"I have no choice," he said.

"Nor have I. All we've got now is duty and responsibility."

She took her place on the platform, her two guards beside her. "Good-bye, Captain James Kirk." Her voice broke.

"Good-bye," Kirk said. He walked swiftly to Scott at the transporter desk. "Energize," he said. Scott turned the dial and the

figure of Elaan began to shimmer. He turned for his last look at her. Her eyes were on his, bright with tears.

McCoy met him excitedly as he walked out of the bridge elevator. "Jim, I've finally isolated the poisonous substance in that woman's tears. I think I've found the antidote."

"There's no need for it, Doctor," Spock said. "The Captain has found his own antidote. The *Enterprise* infected the Captain long before the Dohlman's tears touched him."

Kirk said, "Mr Sulu, take us out of orbit. Ahead Warp Two."

Was the *Enterprise* the antidote to Elaan? McCoy and Spock seemed very sure it was. He was not so sure. Not now, anyway.

THE PARADISE SYNDROME

(Margaret Armen)

Doom was in the monster asteroid hurtling toward the planet on a collision course.

It was a fate which Kirk refused to accept. Stately pine trees edged the meadow where he, Spock and McCoy had materialized. There was the nostalgic fragrance of honeysuckle in his nostrils mingled with the freshness of wild roses. From somewhere nearby he could hear the murmur of a brook bubbling over pebbles. Violets, he thought. Their flat, sweet green leaves would carpet its damp banks, the flowers hidden among them.

"It's unbelievable," he said, suddenly homesick, Earth-sick. He stooped to pick a buttercup. "How long, Bones, since you saw one of these?"

"At least three years, Jim."

"It seems like three hundred." But the planet's similarity to Earth was less of a mystery than the astounding fact of its survival. It was located in a sector of its solar system where an asteroid belt had succeeded in smashing all other planets into dusty, drifting desolation.

"Two months from now when that giant asteroid bits this place —" McCoy began.

"We're here to see that it doesn't hit it," Kirk said. "Spock, how much time do we have to investigate?"

"If we're to divert the asteroid, Captain, we must warp out of orbit within thirty hours. Every second we delay in reaching the deflection point will compound the problem, perhaps past solution."

McCoy halted. "What in blazes is *that?*" he exclaimed.

Ahead of them, topping a shallow hill stood a tall tower, obelisk-shaped, composed of some gleaming metal. Wild flowers were heaped around its base. Nearing it, they could see that its surface was inscribed with curious, unreadable symbols.

"Analysis, Mr Spock."

Spock was readjusting a dial on his tricorder. He frowned. "Incomplete, sir. It's an alien metal of some kind—an alloy resistant to probe. Readings can't even measure its age accurately."

"Any theories about what it could be?"

"Negative, Captain. But alloys of this complexity are found only in cultures that parallel our own—or surpass it."

"Buttercups in a meteor area but no meteor craters," McCoy said. "The whole place is an enigma, biologically and culturally."

"Thirty hours," Kirk said. "Let's not waste them. This Paradise may support some life-forms."

It did. Below the obelisk's hill lay a clearing. Copper-skinned people were moving about in it with an ease which declared it to be their home. In its center a large, circular lodge lifted to a roof that seemed thatched with reeds. Animal hides had been sewn together and stretched to compose its walls. A woman, children around her, was mixing meal with water she dipped from a crude pottery bowl with a gourd. Near her an old man, a heap of what looked like flint arrow heads beside him, was bent over his work. To his right, younger men, magnificently muscled, bows slung over their shoulders, were gathered around a painted skin target, engaged in some amiable argument. Perhaps it was the way the russet tone of their bodies blended with the hue of their beaded leather clothing that explained the sense of peace that lay like a blessing over the whole settlement. Here was man at one with his environment.

"Why, they look—I'd swear they are American Indians!" cried McCoy.

"They are," Spock said. "A mixture of advanced tribes—Navajo, Mohican, Delaware."

"It's like coming on Shangri-La," Kirk said. "Could there be a more evolved civilization on this planet, Spock? One capable of building that obelisk—or developing an asteroid-deflector system?"

"The sensors indicate only one form of life type here, Captain."

"Shouldn't we tell them, Jim?"

"What, Bones? That an asteroid is going to smash their world to atoms?"

Spock said, "Our appearance would only serve to frighten and confuse them, Doctor."

"All right," Kirk said abruptly. "We've got a job to do. Let's get back to the *Enterprise.*" But as he turned away, he looked back at the Indian village, his face wistful, a little envious.

"Something wrong, Jim?"

"What?" Kirk said absently. "Oh, nothing. It just looks so peaceful and uncomplicated. No problems, no command decisions. Just *living.*"

McCoy smiled. "Back in the twentieth century it was called the 'Tahiti syndrome,' Jim—a typical reaction to idyllic, unspoiled nature. It's especially common to overpressured leader types like Star Fleet captains."

"All right, Bones. So I need a vacation. First let's take care of that asteroid."

Kirk moved on toward the obelisk. Stepping on to its pediment, he flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise!*"

"Aye, Captain." It was Scott's voice.

The order for beam-up was on Kirk's lips when the metal under his feet gave way. What appeared to be a panel in the pediment slid open and tumbled him down a steep flight of stairs. In the narrow shaft of daylight that shone through the gap, he had barely time to note that the panel's underside was dotted with vari-colored control buttons. Then the panel closed silently. Groggy, he raised his head—and his shoulder hit one of the buttons. A shrill buzz sounded. A blue-green beam flashed out. It widened and spread until he was completely bathed in blue-green luminescence. It held him, struggling. Then he fell down the rest of the steep stairs—and lay still.

Spock was the first to notice his disappearance. Appalled, McCoy joined him. They circled the obelisk, their anxiety mounting in them. When Spock had raked the empty meadow with his eyes to no effect, he opened his communicator, reported the news to Scott and ordered beam-down of a Security Guard search party. But neither the Guards nor their sensor probes succeeded where the Vulcan's sharp eyes had failed. The panel gave no hint of its existence. Stern-faced, Spock gave the meadow another rake with his eyes before he made his decision. He jerked open his communicator to say curtly, "Prepare to beam us all back up, Mr Scott. We're warping out of orbit immediately."

"Leaving? You can't be serious, Spock!" McCoy said.

"That asteroid is almost as large as your Earth's moon, Doctor —"

"The devil with the asteroid!" McCoy shouted. "It won't get here for two months!"

"If we reach that deflection point in time, it may not get here at all." Spock's face was impassive.

"In the meantime, what about Jim?"

"As soon as the asteroid is diverted, we will return and resume the search."

"That'll be hours from now! He may be hurt! Dying!"

Spock faced him. "If we fail to reach that deflection point at the exact moment, we will not be able to divert it. In such case, Doctor, everyone on this planet, including the Captain, will die."

"Can a few minutes more matter?"

"In the time it has taken for this explanation, the asteroid has sped thousands of miles closer to this planet—and to the Captain." Imperturbable, he spoke into his communicator. "Beam us up, Mr Scott."

Scott's voice was heavy with disapproval. "Beaming up, Mr Spock."

The object of their concern wasn't dying; but he was breathing painfully, slowly. He seemed to be in a large, vaultlike chamber; but the dizziness in his head made it as hard for his eyes to focus as it made it to remember where he'd come from or how he'd got here. He was sure of nothing but the vertigo that swayed him in sickly waves when he tried to stand up. In his fall, he'd dropped his phaser and communicator. Now he stumbled over them. He picked them up, staring at them without recognizing them. After a moment, he stopped puzzling over them to start groping his way up the metal stairs. As he stepped on the first one, a sharp musical note sounded. He accepted it with the same dazedness that had accepted the unfamiliarity of his phaser and communicator. Then his reaching hand brushed against some button in the panel above him. It slid open as silently as it had closed; and he hauled himself up through it into the daylight.

The three girls, flower baskets in their arms, startled him. So did their bronze skins. They were staring at him, more astonished than he was. One was beautiful, he thought. Under the long, black hair that glittered in the sunshine, she bore herself with the dignity of a young queen, despite the amazement on her face.

In their mutually dumbfounded silence, he decided he liked her high cheekbones. They emphasized the lovely, smooth planes of her brow, cheeks and chin. The other two girls seemed frightened of him. So was she, he suspected; but she didn't turn to run away.

Instead, she made a commanding gesture to her companions—and dropped to her knees at Kirk's feet. Then the others knelt, too. All three placed their palms on their foreheads.

Kirk found his voice. It was hoarse. "Who—are you?" he said.

"I am Miramanee," the queenlike girl said. "We are your people. We have been waiting for you to come."

But her ready welcome of him wasn't repeated so quickly from the elderly chief of the Indian village. Kirk's greeting into the communal lodge was courteous but reserved. It was primitively but comfortably furnished with mats and divans of deerhide. Tomahawks, spears, skin shields and flint knives decorated its walls. There was a fire pit in its center, embers in it still glowing red. The chief sat beside it. Flanking him, three young braves kept their black eyes fixed on Kirk's face. One wore a gleaming silver headband, embossed with a emblem into which a likeness of the obelisk had been etched. Miramanee made her obeisance to the chief; and turning to Kirk, said, "This is Goro."

The old man gestured to a pile of skins across from him.

"Our priestess has said you appeared to her and her handmaidens from the walls of the temple. So it is that our legend foretells. Though we do not doubt the words of Miramanee, these are troubled times. We must be sure."

"I'll answer any questions I can," Kirk said, "but as I told your priestess, many things are strange to me."

The warrior who wore the emblemed headband cried out, "He doesn't even know our danger! How can he save us?"

"Silence, Salish! It is against custom to interrupt the tribal Elder in council! Even for the Medicine chief!"

But Salish persisted. "Words will not save us when the skies darken! I say he must *prove* he is a god!"

"I will have silence!" Goro addressed Kirk. "Three times the skies have darkened since the harvest. Our legend predicts much danger. It promises that the Wise Ones who placed us here will send a god to save us—one who can awake the temple spirit and make the skies grow quiet. Can you do this?"

Kirk hesitated, searching frantically through his emptied memory for some recollection that would make sense of the question. He saw the suspicion in Salish's eyes hardening into open scorn. "I came from the temple," he said finally. "Just as Miramanee has told… but I came from the sky, too. I can't remember this clearly, but—"

His stumbling words were interrupted by a stir at the lodge entrance. A man entered, the limp body of a boy in his arms. Both were dripping wet. Miramanee, her hand on the boy's soaked hair, cried, "A bad thing has happened! Salish, the child does not breathe! The fish nets pulled him to the bottom of the river. Lino has brought him quickly but he does not move!"

Rising, the Medicine chief went to the boy, and bending his ear to the chest, listened intently. Then he pried open an eyelid to peer into the pupil. After a moment, he straightened. "There is no sound in the body," he announced, "and no light in the eyes. The child will move no more."

Lino had laid the small body on a heap of skins. Kirk glanced around at the shocked, stricken faces. He got up, moved quickly to the child and raised the head. "He is still breathing," he said. Then he stooped to place his mouth on the cold lips. Breathing regularly and deeply, he exhaled air into them. After a moment, he seized the ankles; and began to flex them back and forward against the chest. Salish made a threatening move toward him. He held up a restraining hand and Goro called, "Wait!"

The keen old ears had heard the slight moan. The child stirred feebly—and began to retch. Kirk massaged him briskly. There was a gasping breath. The eyes opened. Kirk stood up, relief flooding through him. "He will be all right now," he said.

Goro placed his palm on his forehead. "The people are grateful."

"It's a simple technique. It goes away back… away back to—"

His voice trailed off. Away back to where? He couldn't remember. This "simple technique"—where had he learned it? Now that the emergency's tension had passed, it was replaced by an anguish of frustration. How had he been marooned in a present that denied him any past? Who was he? He felt as though he were dissolving, his very being slipping through his fingers like so much water.

In a dream he heard Goro say, "Only a god can breathe life into the dead." In a dream he saw him turn to the three young braves. "Do you still question that the legend is fulfilled?"

Two shook their heads. Salish alone refused to touch palm to forehead. Goro turned to Miramanee. "Give the Medicine lodge to the god."

Still in his nightmare of non-being, Kirk felt the silver band of the Medicine chief placed on his head.

It was Scott's angry opinion that too much was being asked of his engines.

"I can't give you Warp Nine much longer, Spock." Calculated disrespect went into the engineer's intercom. "My engines are showing signs of stress."

"Stress or not, we cannot reduce speed, Mr Scott."

"If these circuits of mine get much hotter—" The nervous systems of the *Enterprise* bridge personnel were also showing signs of stress. Their circuits were getting hot under pressure of the race against time being made by the asteroid. Spock alone preserved his equanimity. But even his quiet eyes were riveted to the mam viewing screen where a small luminous blip was becoming increasingly visible. The irregular mass of the thing grew larger and larger, its dull though multiple colors revealing themselves more distinctly with every moment.

"Deflection point minus seven," Chekov said. "Full power, Mr Scott," Spock said into his intercom.

"The relays will reject the overload!"

"Then bypass the relays. Go to manual control."

"If I do that, we'll burn out the engines!"

"I want full power," Spock said tonelessly.

"Aye, sir."

The First Officer swung the command chair around to Sulu. "Magnification, factor 12, Mr Sulu."

Sulu moved a control switch—and the image on the screen jumped into enormous contour. For the first time the asteroid's ominous details could be seen, malignantly jagged—a sharp-fanged mass of rock speeding toward them through the trackless vacuum of space. "Deflection point minus four," Chekov said. Spock looked away from the frightful immensity on the screen and Chekov said, "Minus three now, sir."

The Vulcan hit his intercom button. "All engines stop. Hold position here, Mr Scott."

"All engines stopped, sir."

"Prepare to activate deflectors."

"Aye, sir."

There was an irregular cracking sound, acutely heard in the sudden silence usually filled by the engines' smooth humming. The ship vibrated.

"Power dropping, sir!" cried Sulu.

"Engineering section! Maintain full power. *Full power!*"

Scott's voice was hard. "Dilythium circuits failing, sir. We'll have to replace them."

"Not now," Spock said.

"Zero! Deflection point—we've reached it, sir!"

"Activate!" Spock said sharply.

On the screen the monstrous mass glowed redly. Then the glow flickered and faded.

"Degree of deflection, Mr Sulu?"

"Insufficient, sir."

It was defeat. Horrified silence held the bridge in thrall.

The composure of Spock's voice came like a benediction. "Recircuit power to engines, Mr Scott. Maximum speed. The heading is 37 mark 010."

"That heading will put us right in the asteroid's path, sir."

"I am aware of that, Mr Chekov. My intention is to retreat before it until we can employ all our power on our phaser beams."

"What for?" McCoy demanded.

"To destroy it." Spock turned his chair around as though he were addressing the entire personnel in the bridge. "A narrow phaser beam," he said, "that is concentrated on a single spot of that rock will split it."

"It's also likely to cripple the ship," McCoy said. "Then we'll be crushed by the thing."

"Incorrect, Doctor. We could still evade its path by using our impulse power."

"Jim won't be able to get out of its path!"

"That is another calculated risk we must take," Spock said.

Miramanee, her arms full of new buckskin garments, was approaching Kirk's Medicine lodge when Salish stepped out from behind a pine tree.

"Where are you going?" he said.

"It is my duty to see to the needs of the god," she said quietly.

Salish tore the clothing from her. "You should be working on our ritual cloak!"

She retrieved the clothing. "There will be no ritual between us now, Salish." She spoke gently.

"You cannot go against tradition!"

"It is because of tradition that we cannot now be joined," she said.

"You are promised to *me!*"

"That was before he came."

"Tribal priestess and Medicine chief are always joined!"

"*He* is the Medicine chief." She paused. "Choose another, Salish. Any maiden will be honored to join with you."

"I do not wish another."

Genuine compassion came into her face. "You have no choice," she said.

"And if you had a choice, Miramanee, would you choose me?"

She didn't answer. His face darkened. He wheeled and strode off into a grove of sycamore trees. She shook her head sadly as she watched him disappear. Then her black eyes lit. She walked quickly toward the Medicine lodge; and Kirk, roused from his brooding by her entrance, looked up at her and smiled.

"Perhaps you would like to bathe before you clothe yourself in these." She placed the Indian garments at his feet.

"Miramanee, tell me about the Wise Ones."

"Tell? But a god knows everything."

"Not this god," Kirk said wryly. "Tell me."

She knelt beside him, fingering his uniform wonderingly. "The Wise Ones? They brought us here from far away. They chose a Medicine chief to keep the secret of the temple and to use it when the sky darkens." She reached to touch the back of his uniform. "There are no lacings here," she said, puzzled. "How is it removed?"

He knew he was flushing and felt like a fool. Gently he removed her hand. "And the secret was passed from father to son? Then why doesn't Salish use the secret? Why are the people in danger?"

Still puzzled, she was seeking a way to loosen his belt. "The father of Salish died before he could tell him the secret."

Kirk had taken her hands in his when two girls, accompanied by Goro, came into the lodge. They placed their baskets of fruit at his feet; and Goro, touching his forehead respectfully, said, "The people honor your name. But they do not know what you wish to be called."

Kirk felt the anguish of frustration again. "What do I want to be called?" equaled "Who am I?"—that "I" of his without a Past,

without identity. He was sweating as he fought to dredge up one small clue to the Past that was hidden from him—and suddenly one word advanced from its blackness. He said, "Kir… Kirk. I wish to be called Kirk."

"Kirok?" Goro said.

Kirk nodded. He was exhausted. Something in his face frightened the fruit bearers. They had hoped for the god's approval, not this look of lostness. They withdrew; and Goro, anxious, asked, "Have the gifts displeased you?"

"No. They are good."

"Then it must be ourselves—the way we live. Perhaps we have failed to improve as quickly as the Wise Ones wished."

Kirk could take no more. He found what he hoped were comforting words. "Your land is rich and your people are happy. The Wise Ones could not be displeased with you."

"But there is something," Goro insisted. "Tell us and we will change it."

"I—I can't tell you anything. Except that I have been peaceful and glad here."

Mercifully, Goro seemed satisfied. When he'd left, Kirk turned almost angrily to Miramanee. "Why are they so sure I can save them?"

"You came from the temple. And did you not return life to the dead child?"

He placed his tortured head in his hands. "I—need time," he said, "time to try and remember…"

She placed the buckskin garments on his knees. "Here is much time, my god. Much quietness and much time."

The simplicity with which she spoke was oil on his flayed soul. The strain in it relaxed. "Yes," he said. "Thank you, Miramanee."

The *Enterprise* and the asteroid were speeding on a parallel course. A terrible companion, it traveled with them, a voracious menace that devoured the whole area of the bridge's main viewing screen.

"Coordinates, Mr Chekov?"

"Tau—eight point seven, sir. Beta—point zero four one."

"That's our target, Mr Chekov—the asteroid's weakest point."

Chekov gave Spock a look of awed respect. "Yes, almost dead center, sir."

"Lock all phasers on that mark, Mr Sulu. Maximum intensity, narrow beam. I want that fissure split wide open."

"You sound like a diamond-cutter, Spock," McCoy said.

"An astute analogy, Doctor."

"Phasers locked, sir," Sulu said.

"We will fire in sequence. And will continue firing as long as Mr Scott can maintain power."

"Standing by, sir."

"*Fire phasers!*"

The ship trembled. "Phaser one firing!"

Sulu hit another button. "Phaser two fired!"

On the screen the rocky mass loomed larger than the ship. Fragments erupted from it as the phasers' blue beams struck it.

"Phaser three fired, sir! Phaser four!"

Another cloud of rock segments, sharp, huge were torn from the asteroid.

"All phasers fired, sir."

The stillness of Spock's face gave impressive poignancy to the tone of bitter disappointment in his voice. "Rig for simultaneous firing, Mr Sulu."

In the engineering section, Scott muttered to an assistant, "That Vulcan won't be satisfied till all these panels are a lead puddle!" As he spoke there was a sharp metallic click—and one of his main relays began to smoke.

"Main relay's out again, Mr Scott!" cried the assistant.

"Machines are smarter than people," his chief said. "At least they know enough to quit before they blow themselves up!"

"Commence simultaneous bombardment." As Spock's order was heard on the intercom, a white-hot flash leaped from the engine compartment. There was the roar of an explosion that hurled Scott back against the opposite bulkhead. Spread-eagled, clinging to it, he was close to tears as he watched the death of his friends—his engines. "My bairns," he said brokenly. "My poor bairns…"

"Kirok."

It was a soft whisper but it roused Kirk from his uneasy doze. Kneeling beside him, Miramanee said, "The ritual cloak is finished."

She was very close to him. Under his eyes the long black hair drooped. "If it pleases you, I will name the Joining Day."

"The Joining Day?"

"I am the daughter of chiefs," she said. "Tribal law gives me to our god."

Kirk looked at her, uncomprehending. She bowed her head. "If there is another in your heart, Kirok…"

"There is no one else, Miramanee. In my mind or in my heart."

She was still disturbed by what she feared was his lack of response. "A god's wish is above tribal law. If you do not wish—"

Kirk reached for her. "Miramanee, name the Joining Day."

The shining lashes lifted. "The sooner our happiness together begins, the longer it will last. I name—tomorrow."

The Past was a darkness, cold, impenetrable. If he was a prisoner of the Present, at least it offered this warmth, this glow in the black-lashed eyes. Kirk drew her fiercely to him. He bent his head to her mouth.

Spock had retreated to his quarters. McCoy, entering them without knocking, found him staring at his viewer. "I told you to *rest,* Spock! For the love of heaven, quit looking at that screen!"

The intercom spoke. Scott said furiously, "Our star drive is completely burned out! So don't ask for any more Warp Nine speed! The only thing you've left us, Spock, is impulse power!"

"Estimated repair time?" the Vulcan asked the intercom.

"Hanging here in space? Forever. The only way to fix my engines is to get to the nearest repair base!"

McCoy snapped off the intercom. He laid his hand on Spock's shoulder. "You took that calculated risk for us, for that planet—and for Jim. That you took it is important. That you lost it—well, losing it was in your calculation."

"I accept the full responsibility for the failure, Doctor."

"And my responsibility is the health of this crew. You are to stop driving yourself so hard."

Spock switched the intercom back on. "Resume heading 883 mark 41, Mr Chekov."

"Why, that's back to the planet!" McCoy cried. "Without warp speed, getting to it will take months!"

"Exactly 59.223 days, Doctor. And the asteroid will be four hours behind us all the way."

"Then what's the use? Even if the Captain is still alive, we may not be able to save him! We may not be able to save anything—not even the ship!" McCoy hit the wall. "You haven't heard a word I have said!

All you've been doing is staring at that damn—" He strode over to the screen and struck the image of the obelisk that had appeared on it.

"Another calculated Vulcan risk, Doctor."

Miramanee was radiant in her bridal finery. She was surrounded by women who had crowded into the tribal lodge. As one placed a chaplet of flowers on the shining black hair, she said, "This Joining Day is the end of darkened skies."

Salish dropped the hide back over the lodge's entrance. On his moccasined feet, he walked swiftly toward the obelisk where the god-groom in festive dress was submitting his face to the paint Goro was applying to it from a gourd.

Goro handed the gourd to a young brave. "It is I who must tell the priestess you will follow," he said. "Wait here until I have walked the holy path to the tribal lodge."

When Goro had disappeared down the sun-dappled path, Kirk, smiling, stepped from the obelisk to make his way to the lodge and Miramanee. Salish, dropping from a pine bough above him, stood facing him, blocking the trail. His face was raw with hate.

"Get out of my way," Kirk said.

"Kirok, even though you are a god, I will not permit this joining." Salish pulled a flint knife. "Before I permit it, you must strike me dead."

"I don't wish to strike anybody dead," Kirk said. But Salish jumped him. Kirk sidestepped the lunge; and Salish, rushing him again, scraped the knife across his cheek.

"You bleed, Kirok! Gods do not bleed!" He drove at Kirk with the knife, murder in his eyes. They grappled; and Kirk wrenched the knife from his grasp. Salish flung himself to the ground. "Kill me, Kirok! Kill me now! And I will return from the dead to prove to the people you are no god!"

Kirk looked at the maddened face at his feet. Placing the knife in his belt, he stepped over the prone body and moved on down the path. This imposed god-role of his had its liabilities. On the other hand it had brought him Miramanee. At the thought of her he hastened his stride toward the lodge.

Two braves greeted him at its entrance. A magnificent feathered cloak was placed around his shoulders. Miramanee moved to him; and on instruction, he enfolded her in the cloak to signify the oneness of marriage. Goro struck a stone chime with a mallet. There were shouts of delight from the people. Beads rattled in gourds, tom-toms beat louder and louder—and Miramanee, slipping from under the cloak, ran from the lodge. At the entrance, she paused to look back at him, her flower-crowned face bright with inviting laughter. This time Kirk didn't need instruction. He sped after her, the feathered cloak flying behind him.

She'd reached the pine woods when he caught her. She fell to the soft bed of scented needles and he flung himself down beside her.

He grew to love the pine woods. It was pure happiness to help Miramanee gather their fragrant boughs for the fire pit in their Medicine lodge. He loved Miramanee, too; but sometimes her black eyes saw too deeply.

They were lying, embraced, beside the fire pit when she lifted her head from his shoulder. "Each time you hold me is more joyous than it was on our Joining Day. But you—"

He kissed her eyelids. "It's the dreams," he said.

"I thought they had gone. I thought you no longer looked for the strange lodge in the sky."

He released her. "The dreams have returned. I see faces, too. Even in daylight, I see faces. They're dim—but I feel that I know them. I—I feel my place is where they are. Not here—not here. I have no right to all this happiness…"

She smiled down into his troubled face. "I have a gift for you." She reached her hand under the blanket they lay on and withdrew the papoose board she'd hidden under it. She knelt to lay it at his feet.

"I carry your child, my Kirok."

Kirk was swept by a sense of almost intolerable tenderness. The lines of anxiety in his face softened. He drew her head back to his shoulder.

Again without knocking, McCoy entered Spock's quarters.

"I thought I told you to report to Sickbay," he said belligerently.

Spock didn't so much as glance up from his small cabin computer. "There isn't time," he said. "I've got to decipher those obelisk symbols. I judge them to be a highly advanced form of coding."

"You've been trying to do that ever since we started back to the planet! That's fifty-eight days ago!"

Spock passed a hand over his tired eyes as though to wipe a mist away from them. He had grown gaunt from fatigue. "I'm aware of that, Doctor. I'm also aware that we'll have barely four hours to effect rescue when we reach the planet. I feel those symbols are the key."

"You won't decipher them by killing yourself!" McCoy adopted the equable tone of reason. "Spock, you've hardly eaten or slept for weeks now. If you don't let up on yourself, it is rational to expect collapse."

"I am not hungry, Doctor. And under stress we Vulcans can do without sleep for weeks."

McCoy aimed his medical tricorder at him. Peering at it, he said, "Well, I can tell you your Vulcan metabolism is so low it can hardly be measured. And as for the pressure of that green ice water in your veins you call blood—"

To straighten Spock had to support himself by clutching his console. "My physical condition is not important. That obelisk is."

"My diagnosis is exhaustion caused by overwork and guilt. Yes, *guilt.* You're blaming yourself for crippling the ship." McCoy shook Spock's shoulder. "Listen to me! You made a command decision. Jim would have made the same one. My prescription is rest. Do I have to call the Security Guards to enforce it?"

Spock shook his head. He moved unsteadily to his bunk and lay down. No sooner had McCoy, satisfied, closed the door behind him than he got up again—and returned to his viewer.

Kirk was trying to improve the lighting of his lodge by constructing a crude lamp. But Miramanee could not grasp the function of the wick.

"It will make night into day?" she said wonderingly. "And I can cook more and pre—pre…"

"Preserve food," Kirk said.

"For times of famine." They smiled at each other. "Ah," she said, "that is why you are making the lamp, Kirok. So I shall be forever cooking."

His laugh ended abruptly. Miramanee's face had gone tight with terror. A gust of wind pulled at the lodge's hide door. "There is nothing to fear," he said. "It is just wind."

"Miramanee is a stupid child," she said. "No, there is nothing to fear. You are here." But she had moved to the lodge door to look nervously up at the sky. She turned. "It is time to go to the temple, Kirok. The people will be there waiting for you."

"Why?"

"To save them," she said simply.

"Wind can't harm them." But the gravity in her face didn't lighten. "The wind is just the beginning," she said. "Soon the lake will go wild, the river will grow big. Then the sky will darken and the earth will shake. Only you can save us."

"I can't do anything about the wind and the sky."

She removed the lamp from his hand, seized his arm pleadingly to pull Mm toward the door. "Come, Kirok. You must come."

A sense of threat suddenly oppressed him. "Miramanee, wait—"

She pulled harder at him, her panic mounting. "We must go before it is too late! You must go inside the temple and make the blue flame shine!"

Kirk stared at her, helpless to reach her understanding. "I don't know how to get inside the temple!"

"You are a god!"

He grabbed her shoulders roughly. *I am not a god.* I am a man —just a man."

She shrank from him. "No! No! You are a god, Kirok!"

"Look at me," he said. "And *listen.* I am not a god. If you can only love a god, you cannot love me. I say it again—I am a *man!*"

She flung her arms about his neck, covering his face with frantic kisses. "It must be kept secret, then! If you are not a god, the people will kill you!"

A fiercer gust of wind shook the poles of the lodge. Miramanee screamed. "You must speak to the people—or they will say you are not a god. Come, Kirok, come!"

The tribe had gathered in the central lodge. Under the onslaught of the rising wind, shields, spears, knives had been torn from their places on the hide walls. Women were screaming, pulling at

children, shoving them under heaps of skins. Salish fought his way through the maddened crowd to confront Kirk.

"Why are you not at the temple, Kirok? Soon the ground will begin to tremble!"

"We shall all go to the caves," Kirk said.

"The caves!" Salish shouted. "Is that the best a god can do for his people?"

Goro spoke. "When the ground trembles, even the caves are unsafe, Kirok. You must rouse the spirit of the temple—or we will all die!"

"What are you waiting for, god?" Salish said.

Kirk unclasped Miramanee's arms from his neck and placed her hand in Goro's. "Take care of her," he said. "I will go to the temple."

Outside, the gale tore his breath from his lungs. Somewhere to his left a pine tree crashed. Thunder rumbled along the horizon in a constant cannonade. And the sky was darkening. Boughs whipped across his face as he groped his half-blind way down the worn trail to the obelisk. The enigmatic tower told him nothing. Its inscrutable symbols held their secret as remorselessly as ever. Kirk beat at the hard metal with his fists, shouting, screaming at it, "I am Kirok! I have come! Open to me!"

The words were drowned by the screams of the ungearing wind.

McCoy stopped dead at the door of Spock's quarters.

Strains of unearthly music were coming from the cabin. Maybe *I've* broken," McCoy thought. "Maybe I've died, gone to heaven and am hearing the music of the spheres." It wasn't music of the spheres. It was music got from an oddly shaped Vulcan harp. Spock, huddled over his computer, was strumming it, his face tight with concentration.

"I prescribed sleep," McCoy said.

"Inaccurate, Doctor. You prescribed rest." The musician looked up from his instrument. "The obelisk symbols are not letters. They are musical notes."

"You mean a song?"

"In a way. Certain cultures, offshoots of our Vulcan one, use musical notes as words. The tones correspond roughly to an alphabet." He laid the harp aside. "The obelisk is a marker left by a super race on that planet. Apparently, they passed through the

galaxy, rescuing primitive cultures threatened by extinction—and 'seeded' them, so to speak, where they could live and grow."

"Well," said McCoy. "I must admit I've wondered why so many humanoids were scattered through this galaxy."

"So have I. I judge the Preservers account for a number of them."

"Then these 'Preservers' must have left that obelisk on the planet as an asteroid-deflector."

Spock nodded. "It's become defective."

"So we have to put it back in working order. Otherwise…"

"Precisely, Doctor."

The earth around the obelisk was shaking. Villagers, panicked to the point of madness, had fled to their temple in a last hope of salvation. Kirk, backed against it, wiped blood from his cheek where one of their stones had gashed it.

"False god, die!"

It was Salish. As though his cry of hate were the words they had been waiting to hear spoken, the crowd broke out into roars of accusation. Women screamed the enormity of their sense of betrayal. "Die, liar, die! Die as we all will die!" Men stooped for rocks. Goro shrieked, "Impostor! Liar!"

Miramanee flung herself before Kirk, her arms spread wide. "No! No! You are wrong! He can save us!"

Kirk pushed her away. "You cannot help me. Go back to them, Miramanee! Go back to them!" Salish burst from the crowd and seized her.

"Kirok! Kirok! I belong to you!" She wrenched free of Salish and flew back to Kirk.

"Then you die, too! With your false god!"

His rock struck her. She fell. There was a hail of stones; she elbowed up and crawled to Kirk. Before he could lift her to shield her with his body, Salish hurled another rock. It caught her in the abdomen.

"Miramanee…" Kirk was on his knees beside her. The crowd closed in for the kill when there came a shimmer of luminescence on the obelisk pediment. The Indians fell back, their stones still in their hands—and Spock and McCoy, in their *Enterprise* uniforms, materialized on each side of the kneeling Kirk.

"Kirok… Kirok…"

McCoy stooped over Miramanee. "I need Nurse Chapel," he told Spock shortly. The Vulcan had his communicator ready. "Beam down Nurse Chapel with a supplementary surgical kit, Mr Scott."

Kirk tried to rise and was pushed gently back by McCoy. "Easy, Jim. Take it easy."

"My wife… my wife—is she all right?"

"Wife?" Spock looked at McCoy. "Hallucinations, Doctor?"

"Jim…"

"Miramanee," Kirk whispered. He looked at her face and closed his eyes.

The *Enterprise* nurse rose from the Indian girl's crumpled body. She joined McCoy who was making a last diagnostic pass over Kirk's unmoving form. "He hasn't recognized us," she said.

Spock was with Miramanee. "The nurse has given you medicine to ease the pain. Why were the people stoning you?"

"Kirok did not know how to get back into the temple."

"Naturally," Spock said. "He didn't come from there."

She lifted her head. "He did. I saw him come out of the temple."

Spock looked at her thoughtfully. Then he spoke to McCoy.

"The Captain, Doctor?"

"His brain is undamaged. Everything's functioning but his memory."

"Can you help him?"

"It will take time."

"Time, Doctor, is the one thing we do not have." He spoke into his communicator. "Spock here. Mr Sulu?"

"Tracking report, sir. Sixty-five minutes to end of safety margin."

"Report noted." He returned to Kirk. "Do you think he's strong enough for a Vulcan mind fusion, Doctor?"

"We have no choice," McCoy said.

Spock stooped to place a hand on each side of Kirk's head. He spoke very slowly, with repressed intensity, his eyes boring into Kirk's closed ones. "I am Spock," he said with great distinctness. "You are James Kirk. Our minds are moving toward each other, closer…" His face was strained with such concentration, he seemed to be in pain. "Closer, James Kirk… closer… closer…"

Kirk moaned. "No… no… Miramanee…"

Spock increased the pressure against Kirk's temples as he fought to reach the lost memory. He shut his eyes, all his powers centered on the struggle. "Closer, James Kirk, closer…"

He gave a sudden hoarse cry of agony and Kirk's body galvanized. Spock was breathing heavily, his voice assuming the entranced tone of one possessed. "I am Kirok… I am the god of the metal tower." Spock's agonized voice deepened. "I am Kirok… I am Kiro—I am Kir—I am Spock! *Spock!*"

He jerked his hands away from Kirk's temples, his face tortured. Kirk lay still, his eyes closed.

"What's wrong?"

"He—he is an extremely dynamic personality, Doctor."

"So it didn't work," McCoy said hopelessly. He shook his head—and Kirk's eyes opened, full awareness in them.

He sat up. "It did work. Thank you, Mr Spock."

"Captain, were you inside that obelisk?"

"Yes. It seemed to be loaded with scientific equipment."

"It's a huge deflecting mechanism, Captain. It is imperative that we get inside it at once."

"The key may be in those symbols," Kirk said. "If we could only decipher them."

"They are musical notes, Captain."

"You mean entry can be gained by playing notes on some musical instrument?"

"That's one method. Another would be placement of tonal qualities stated in a proper sequence."

Kirk said, "Give me your communicator, Mr Spock." He paused a moment. "Total control! Consonants and vowels. I must have hit the control accidentally when I contacted the ship to ask Scotty for beam-up!"

"If you could remember your exact words, Captain…"

"Let's see if I can. They were 'Kirk to *Enterprise'.* Then Scotty said, 'Aye, Captain' ".

The carefully smoothed panel in the obelisk slid open. As Spock stepped into it with him, Kirk looked back at Miramanee. "Stay with her, Bones."

The silence within the obelisk was absolute. As they examined the buttoned panel, Spock said, "From its position this button should activate the deflection mechanism."

"Careful!" Kirk warned. "I hit one and the beam it emitted was what paralyzed my memory."

"Probably an information beam activated out of sequence."

"Look, Spock. Over there—the other side of the vault. More symbols; and like those on the outside of the tower. Can you read them?"

Spock nodded. "I have an excellent eye for musical notes, Captain."

"Then activate, Mr Spock!"

The Vulcan pressed three lower buttons in swift succession. Above them the wind-swept darkness was sliced by a wide streak of rainbow-colored flame that sprang from the tower's peak like a giant's sword blade. There was a screaming explosion that deafened them even in their underground insulation.

"That was the sound of deflection impact, Captain. The asteroid has been diverted."

Spock was right. They emerged from the obelisk into calm air, fresh but windless. The sky had lightened to pure blue.

Kirk dropped to his knees beside Miramanee. "How is she, Bones?"

"She was pregnant and there were bad internal injuries, Jim."

"Will she live?"

McCoy's face was his answer. Kirk swayed, fighting for control. Miramanee, her face bloodless under the high cheekbones he loved, opened her eyes and recognized him.

"Kirok. It is—true. You *are* safe."

"And so are your people," Kirk said.

"I knew you would save them, my chief. We… we will live long and happily. I will? bear you many strong sons. And love you always."

"And I will love you," he said. He kissed her; and she said weakly, "Each kiss is like the… the first?"

Her voice failed on the last word. The hand on his fell away.

He bent again to kiss the dead face.

McCoy laid a hand on his shoulder.

"It's over, Jim. But in our way we kept their peacefulness for them."

THE ENTERPRISE INCIDENT

(D. C. Fontana)

Operating under sealed orders, Kirk had found from long experience, almost always meant something messy. It became worse when the orders, once opened, demanded that they be kept secret from his own officers during the initial phases. And it was worst of all when those initial phases looked outright irrational.

Take the present situation. Here was the *Enterprise,* on the wrong side of the neutral zone, in Romulan space, surrounded by three Romulan cruisers which had simply popped out of nothingness, undetected by any sensor until far too late. Her presence there was a clear violation of a treaty; and since the Romulans were now using warships modeled on those of the Klingons, she was also heavily outgunned.

Kirk had worked out no way of making so suicidal a move on his part explicable except that of becoming irritable and snappish, as though his judgment had been worn down by fatigue. It was a bad solution. His officers were the best in Starfleet; sooner or later they would penetrate the deception, and conclude that whenever Kirk appeared to be worn down to the point of irrationality, he was operating under sealed orders.

And when the day came when he actually *was* too tired to know what he was doing, they would obey him blindly anyhow—and scratch one starship.

"Captain," Uhura said, her voice distant. "We are receiving a Class Two signal from one of the Romulan vessels."

"Put it on the main viewing screen, Lieutenant. Also, code a message to Starfleet Command, advising them of our situation and including all log entries to this point. Spock, your sensors read clear; what happened?"

"Sir, I have no more than a hypothesis…"

"Signal in," Uhura said. The main screen flickered briefly, then clarified to show a Romulan officer, with his own bridge behind him, carefully out of focus. He looked rather like Spock, and spoke like him, too.

"You have been identified as the Starship *Enterprise.* Captain James T. Kirk last known to be in command."

Kirk picked up a hand mike and thumbed its button. "Your information is correct. This is Captain Kirk."

"I am Subcommander Tal of the Romulan Imperial Fleet. Your ship is surrounded, Captain. You will surrender immediately—or we will destroy you."

Kirk flicked the switch and turned his face away toward Spock. He rather doubted that the Romulan could lip-read a foreign language, but there was no point in giving him the chance.

"Spock, come here. What do you make of this? They want something, or they would have destroyed us by now."

"No doubt, Captain. That would be standard procedure for them."

"It's my ship they want, I assume. And very badly."

"Of course. It would be a great prize. An elementary deduction, Captain."

"Skip the logic lessons." Kirk opened the mike again. "Save your threats, Subcommander," he said harshly. "If you attempt to board my ship, I'll blow her up. You gain nothing."

Tal had apparently expected nothing else, but a slight frown cut across his forehead nonetheless. "May I ask, Captain, who is that beside you?"

"My First Officer, Commander Spock. I'm surprised by your ignorance."

"You mean to insult me, but there is nothing discreditable in not knowing everything. Finding a Vulcan so highly placed in the Federation fleet does surprise me, I readily grant. However…"

He was interrupted by a beeping noise and hit an invisible control plate. "Yes, Commander? Excuse me, Captain…"

The screen dissolved into traveling moire patterns. Then Tal was back.

"No one should decide quickly to die, Captain," he said. "We give you one of your hours. If you do not surrender your ship at the end of that time, your destruction is certain. We will be open to communication, should you wish it."

"You understand Starfleet Command has been advised of our situation."

"Of course," Tal said, somewhat condescendingly. "But a subspace message will take three weeks to reach Starfleet—and I

think they would hesitate to send a squadron in after you, in any event. The decision is yours, Captain. One hour."

His image winked out, and was replaced by stars.

"Lt. Uhura," Kirk said, "order all senior officers to report to the Briefing Room on the double."

"All right," Kirk said, surveying the group. Spock, McCoy and Scott were present; Chekov and Sulu on the bridge with Uhura. "Spock, you had a theory on why your sensors didn't pick up the Romulan ships, until they were right on top of us."

"I believe the Romulans have devised an improved cloaking system which renders our tracking sensors useless. You will observe, Captain, that the three ships outside are modeled after Klingon cruisers. Changing ship designs that drastically is expensive, and the Klingon cruiser has no important inherent advantages over the Romulan model of which we are aware—unless it is adaptable to some sort of novel screening device."

"If so, the Romulans could attack into Federation territory before we'd know they were there; before a planet or a vessel could begin to get its defenses up."

"They caught *us* right enough," Scott said.

"A brilliant observation, Mr Scott," Kirk snapped. "Do you have any other helpful opinions?"

Scott was momentarily nonplussed. Then he pumped his shoulders slightly in a shrug. "We've not got many choices…"

"Three. We can fight—and be destroyed. Or we can destroy the *Enterprise* ourselves to keep her from the Romulans. Or—we can surrender." There was a stir among the other officers; Kirk had expected it, and overrode it. "We might be able to find out how the Romulans' new cloaking device works. The Federation *must* have that information. Opinions?"

"Odds are against our finding out anything," Scott said. "And if the *Enterprise* is taken by the Romulans, they'll know everything there is to know about a starship."

"Spock?"

"If we had not crossed the Neutral Zone on your order," Spock said coldly and evenly, "you would not now require our opinions to bolster a decision that should never have had to be made."

The others stared at him, and then at Kirk. McCoy leaned forward. "Jim, *you* ordered us—? But you had no authority—"

"Dismissed, Doctor!"

"But Jim…"

"Bridge to Captain," Uhura's voice broke in.

"Kirk here."

"The Romulan vessel is signaling again, sir."

"Put it on our screen here, Lieutenant."

The triangular Briefing Room viewscreen lit up to show the Vulcan-like features of Tal. He said without preamble, "My Commander wishes to speak with you, Captain Kirk."

"Very well," Kirk said, slightly surprised. "Put him on."

"The Commander wishes to see you and your First Officer aboard this vessel. It is felt that the matter requires—discussion. The Commander is a highly placed representative of the Romulan Star Empire."

"Why should we walk right into your hands?"

"Two of my officers will beam aboard your vessel as exchange hostages while you are here."

"There's no guarantee they'll transport over here once we've entered your ship."

A faint, cynical smile seemed to be threatening to break over Tal's face. "Granted we do not easily trust each other, Captain. But *you* are the ones who violated our territory. Should it not be we who distrust *your* motives? However, we will agree to a simultaneous exchange."

Perfect—and yet at the same time, impossible to explain to his worriedly watching officers. After appearing to consider, Kirk said, "Give us the transporter coordinates and synchronize."

Tal nodded and his image faded.

"I must insist on advising against this, Captain," protested Scott. "The Romulans will try something tricky…"

"We'll learn nothing by staying aboard the *Enterprise,*" Kirk said. "One final order. Engineer Scott, you are in charge. If we do not return, this ship must not be taken. If the Romulans attempt it, you will fight—and if necessary, destroy the *Enterprise.* Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Captain." In point of fact, Scott looked as though it was the first order he had understood in days. Well, with any luck, he'd understand all the rest later—if there was going to be any "later."

"Very well. Alert Transporter Officer."

Kirk and Spock were conducted to the quarters of the Romulan Commander by two guards, after having been relieved of their weapons. Had the necessity existed, those two guards would never have known what had hit them, sidearms or no, but nothing was to be gained now by overpowering them; Kirk merely noted the overconfidence for possible future use.

Then the door snapped open—and the Romulan Commander, standing behind a desk, was revealed to be a woman. And no ordinary woman, either. Of course, no ordinary woman could become both a ranking officer and a government representative in a society of warriors; but this one was beautiful, aristocratic, compelling—an effect which was, if anything, heightened by the fact that she was of Vulcanoid, not human stock. Kirk and Spock looked quickly at each other. Kirk had the impression that if Spock could whistle, he would.

"Captain Kirk," she said.

"I'm honored, Commander."

"I do not think so, Captain. But we have a matter of importance to discuss, and your superficial courtesies are the overture to that discussion." Her eyes swung leveling to Spock. "You are First Officer…?"

"Spock."

"I speak first with the Captain."

Spock flicked a glance at Kirk, who nodded. The First Officer tilted a half bow toward the Commander, and Kirk entered the office. The door snapped shut behind him.

"All right," he said. "Forgetting the superficial courtesies, let's just have at it. I'm not surrendering my ship to you."

"An admirable attitude in a starship captain," she said coolly. "But the matter of trespass into Romulan space is one of galactic import—a violation of treaties. Now I ask you simply: what is your mission here?"

"Instrument failure caused a navigational error. We were across the Zone before we realized it. Your ships surrounded us before we could turn about."

"A starship—one of Starfleet's finest vessels. You are saying instrument failure as radical as you suggest went unnoticed until your ship was well past the Neutral Zone?"

"Accidents happen; cutoffs and backup systems can malfunction. We've been due in for overhaul for two months, but haven't been

assigned a space dock yet."

"I see. But you have managed to navigate with this malfunction?"

"The error has been corrected," Kirk said. He knew well enough how transparent the lie was, but the charade had to be played out; he needed to seem thoroughly outgunned—in all departments.

"Most convenient. I hardly believe it will clear you of espionage."

"We were not spying."

"Your language has always been difficult for me, Captain," the woman said drily. "Perhaps you have another word for it?"

"At worst, it would be nothing more than surveillance. But I assure you that you are drawing an unjustified…"

"Captain, if a Romulan vessel ventured far into Federation territory without good explanation, what would a Star Base commander do? It works both ways—and I strongly doubt you are the injured party." She pressed a button and the door opened. "Spock, come in. Both the Federation Council and the Romulan Praetor are being informed of this situation, but the time will be long before we receive their answer. I wish to interrogate you to establish a record of information for them in the mean-time. The Captain has already made his statement."

"I understand," Spock said.

"I admit to some surprise on seeing you, Spock. We were not aware of Vulcans aboard the *Enterprise.*"

"Starfleet is not in the habit of informing Romulans of its ships' personnel."

"Quite true. Yet certain ships—certain officers—are known to us. Your situation appears most interesting."

"What earns Spock your special interest?" Kirk broke in.

"His species, obviously. Our forebears had the same roots and origins—something you will never understand, Captain. We can appreciate the Vulcans—our distant brothers. Spock, I have heard of Vulcan integrity and personal honor. There is a well-known saying that Vulcans are incapable of lying. Or is it a myth?"

"It is no myth."

"Then tell me truthfully now: on your honor as a Vulcan, what was your mission?"

"I reserve the privilege of speaking the truth only when it will not violate my honor as a Vulcan."

"It is unworthy of a Vulcan to resort to subterfuge."

"It is equally unworthy of a Romulan," Spock said. "It is not a lie to keep the truth to one's self."

That was one sentence too many, Kirk thought. But given Spock's nature and role, it could hardly have been prevented. The woman was wily as well as intelligent.

"Then," she said, "there is a truth here that is still unspoken."

"You have been told everything that there is to know," Kirk said. "There is nothing else."

"There is Mr Spock's unspoken truth. You knew of the cloaking device that we have developed. You deliberately violated Romulan space in a blatant spy mission on the order of Federation Command."

"We've been through that, Commander."

"We have not even begun, Captain. There is of course no force I can use on a Vulcan that will make him speak. But there are Romulan methods capable of going into a human mind like a spike into a melon. We use them when the situation requires it."

"Then you know," Spock said, "that they are ineffective against humans with Command training."

"Of course," said the Commander. "They will leave him dead—or what might be worse than dead. But I would be replaced did I not apply them as Procedure dictates. One way or another, I will know your unspoken truths."

To Kirk, Spock's iron expression never seemed to change, but now he caught a very faint flicker of indecision which must have spoken volumes to the Romulan woman. Kirk said hastily, "Let her rant. There is nothing to say."

Spock did not look at him. "I cannot allow the Captain to be any further destroyed," the First Officer said in a low monotone. "The strain of command has worn heavily on him. He has not been himself for several weeks."

"There's a lie," Kirk said, "if ever I heard one."

"As you can see," Spock continued evenly, "Captain Kirk is a highly sensitive and emotional person. I believe he has lost his capacity for rational decision."

"Shut up, Spock."

"I am betraying no secrets. The Commander's suspicion that Starfleet ordered the *Enterprise* into the Zone is unacceptable. Our rapid capture demonstrates its fool-hardiness."

"Spock—damn you, what are doing?"

"I am speaking the truth for the benefit of the *Enterprise* and the Federation. I say—for the record—that Captain Kirk took the *Enterprise* across the Neutral Zone on his own initiative and his craving for glory. He is not sane."

"And I say," Kirk returned between tightly drawn lips, "that you are a filthy traitor."

"Enough," the Commander said, touching a control plate on her desk. "Give me communication with the *Enterprise.*"

After a long moment, Scott's voice said, "*Enterprise;* Acting Officer Scott."

"Officer Scott, Captain James T. Kirk is formally charged with espionage. The testimony of First Officer Spock has confirmed that this intrusion into Romulan space was not an accident; and that your ship was not under orders from Starfleet Command or the Federation Council to undertake such a mission. Captain Kirk was solely responsible. Since the crew had no choice but to obey orders, the crew will not be held responsible. Therefore I am ordering Engineer Scott, presently in command of the *Enterprise,* to follow the Romulan flagship to our home base. You will there be processed and released to Federation Command. Until judgment is passed, Captain Kirk will be held in confinement."

There were a few moments of dead air from the *Enterprise,* but Kirk had no difficulty in guessing what Scotty was doing: ordering the two Romulan hostages to be put in the brig. When he came on again, his voice was almost shaking with suppressed rage.

"This is Lt. Commander Scott. The *Enterprise* follows no orders except those of Captain Kirk. We will stay right here until he returns. And if you make any attempt to commandeer or board us, the *Enterprise* will be blown to bits along with as many of you as we can take with us. Your own knowledge of our armament will tell you that that will be quite a good many."

"You humans make a very brave noise," the Commander said. She sounded angry herself, although her face was controlled. "There are ways to convince you of your errors."

She cut off communication with a flick of a switch. Kirk swung on Spock.

"Did you hear, you pointy-eared turncoat? You've betrayed everything of value and integrity you ever knew. Did you hear the sound of human integrity?"

"Take him to the Security Room."

The guards dragged Kirk out.

"It was your testimony that Captain Kirk was irrational and solely responsible that saved the lives of your crew," the Romulan Commander said. "But don't expect gratitude for it."

"One does not expect logic from humans," Spock said. "As we both know."

"A Vulcan among humans—living, working with them. I would think the situation would be intolerable to you."

"I am half Vulcan. My mother was human."

"To whom is your allegiance, then?" she asked with cool interest. "Do you call yourself Terran or Vulcan?"

"Vulcan."

"How long have you been a Starfleet officer, Spock?"

"Eighteen years."

"You serve Captain Kirk. Do you like him? Do you like your shipmates?"

"The question is irrelevant."

"Perhaps." She drew closer, looking into his eyes challengingly. "But you are subordinate to the Captain's orders. Even to his whims."

"My duty as an officer," Spock said rigidly, "is to obey him."

"You are a superior being. Why do you not command?"

Spock hesitated. "I do not desire a ship of my own."

"Of course you believe that now, after eighteen years. But is it not also true that no one has given you—a Vulcan—that opportunity?"

"Such opportunities are extremely rare."

"For one of your accomplishments and—capabilities—opportunities should be made. And will be. I can see to that—if you will stop looking at the Federation as the whole universe. It is not, you know."

"The thought has occasionally crossed my mind," Spock said.

"You must have your own ship."

"Commander," Spock said pleasantly, "shall we speak plainly? It is you who desperately need a ship. You want the *Enterprise.*"

"Of course! It would be a great triumph for me to bring the *Enterprise* home intact. It would broaden the scope of my powers greatly. It would be the achievement of a lifetime." She paused. "And naturally, it would open equal opportunities to you."

The sound of an intercom spared Spock the need to reply. It was not an open line; the Commander picked up a handset and listened. After a moment she said, "I will come there," and replaced it. Spock raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"Your Captain," she said with a trace of scorn, "tried to break through the sonic disrupter field which wards his cell. Naturally he is injured, and since we do not know how to treat humans, my First Officer asked your ship's surgeon to attend him. The man's first response was, 'I don't make house calls,' whatever that means, but we managed to convince him that it was not a trick and he is now in attendance. Follow me, please."

She led the way out of the office and down the corridor, followed by the omnipresent, silent guards.

"I neglected to mention it," she added, "but I will expect you for dinner. We have much yet to discuss."

"Indeed?" Spock said, looking at her quizzically.

"Allow me to rephrase. Will you join me for dinner?"

"I am honored, Commander. Are the guards also invited?"

For answer, she waved the guards off. They seemed astonished, but were soon out of sight. A moment later she and Spock reached a junction; to the left, the corridor continued, while to the right it brought up against a single door not far away; it was guarded. There was a raised emblem nearby, but from this angle Spock could not read the device on it. He moved toward it.

"Mr Spock!"

He stopped instantly.

"That corridor is forbidden to all but loyal Romulans."

"Of course, Commander," Spock said. "I will obey your restrictions."

"I hope," she said, "soon there will be no need for you to observe *any* restrictions."

"It would be illogical to assume that all conditions remain stable."

They reached the Romulan brig; a guard there saluted and turned off the disruptor field. When they entered the cell, he turned it on again. McCoy was there—and so was Kirk, sitting slumped and blank-eyed on the bed, hands hanging down loosely between his knees.

"You are the physician?" the Commander said.

"McCoy—Chief Medical Officer."

"Captain Kirk's condition?"

"Physically—weak. Mentally—depressed, disoriented, displays feelings of persecution and rebellion."

"Then by your own standards of normality, this man is not fully competent?"

"Not now," McCoy said reluctantly. "No."

"Mr Spock has stated he believes the Captain had no authority or order to cross the Neutral Zone. In your opinion, could this mental incapacity have afflicted the Captain earlier?"

"Yes—it's possible."

"Mr Spock, the Doctor has now confirmed your testimony as to the mental state of your Captain. He was and is unfit to continue in command of the *Enterprise.* That duty has now fallen upon you. Are you ready to exercise that function?"

"I am ready."

McCoy looked aghast. "Spock—I don't believe it!"

"The matter," Spock said, "is not open for discussion."

"What do you mean, not open for discussion? If…"

"That's enough, Doctor," the Commander broke in. "As a physician, your duty is to save lives. Mr Spock's duty is to lead the *Enterprise* to a safe haven."

"There is no alternative, Doctor," Spock added. "The safety of the crew is the paramount issue. It is misguided loyalty to resist any further."

Kirk raised his head very slowly. He looked a good deal more than disoriented; he looked downright mad. Then, suddenly, he was lunging at Spock, his voice a raw scream: "Traitor! I'll—kill—you!"

With the swift precision of a surgeon, Spock grasped Kirk's shoulder and the back of his neck in both hands. The raging Captain stiffened, cried out inarticulately once, and collapsed.

Spock looked down at him, frozen. The guard had drawn his sidearm. McCoy kneeled beside the crumpled Captain, snapped out an instrument, took a reading, prepared a hypo in desperate haste.

"What did you do to him?" McCoy demanded. He administered the shot and then looked up. His voice became hard, snarling. "*What did you do?*"

"I was unprepared for his attack," Spock said. "He—I used the Vulcan death grip instinctively."

McCoy tried a second shot, then attempted to find a pulse or heartbeat.

"Your instincts are still good, Spock," he said with cold remoteness. "He's dead."

"By his own folly," said the Romulan Commander. "Return the corpse and the Doctor to their vessel. Mr Spock, shall we proceed to dinner?"

"That," Spock said, "sounds rather more pleasant."

It was pleasant indeed; it had been a long time since Spock had seen so sumptuously laden a table. He poured more wine for the Commander.

"I have had special Vulcan dishes prepared for you," she said. "Do they meet with your approval?"

"I am flattered, Commander. There is no doubt that the cuisine aboard your vessel far surpasses that of the *Enterprise.* It is indeed a powerful recruiting inducement."

"We have other inducements." She arose and came over to sit down beside him. "You have nothing in Starfleet to which to return. I—*we* offer an alternative. We will find a place for you, if you wish it."

"A—place?"

"With me." She touched his sleeve, his shoulder, then his neck, brushing lightly. "Romulan women are not like Vulcan females. We are not dedicated to pure logic and the sterility of non-emotion. Our people are warriors, often savage; but we are also many other —pleasant things."

"I was not aware of that aspect of Romulan society."

"As a Vulcan, you would study it," she said softly. "But as a human, you would find ways to appreciate it."

"You must believe me, I do appreciate it."

"I'm so glad. There is one final step to make the occasion complete. You will lead a small party of Romulans aboard the *Enterprise.* You will take your rightful place as its commander and lead the ship to a Romulan port—with my flagship at its side."

"Yes, of course," Spock said impatiently. "But not just this minute, surely. An hour from now will do—even better. Will it not, Commander?"

She actually laughed. "Yes, it will, Mr Spock. And you do know that I have a first name."

"I was beginning to wonder."

She leaned forward and whispered. The word would have meant absolutely nothing to a human, but Spock recognized its roots without difficulty.

"How rare and how beautiful," he said. "But so incongruous when spoken by a soldier."

"If you will give me a moment, the soldier will transform herself into a woman." She rose, and he rose with her. Her hand trailed out of his, and a door closed behind her.

Spock turned his back to it, reached inside his runic, and brought out his communicator. Snapping it open, he said quietly, "Spock to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here. I'm already on board—green skin, pointed ears, uniform and all. Do you have the information?"

"Yes, the device is down the first corridor to the left as you approach the Commander's office, closely guarded and off limits to all but authorized personnel."

"I'll get it. Will you be able to get back to the *Enterprise* without attracting their attention?"

"Unknown. At present…"

"Somebody coming. Out."

Spock replaced the communicator quickly, but it was a long minute before the Commander returned. The change was quite startling; compared to her appearance in uniform, she seemed now to be wearing hardly anything, although this was in part an illusion of contrast.

"Mr Spock?" she said, posing. "Is my attire now more—appropriate?"

"More than that. It should actually stimulate our conversation."

She raised her hand, fingers parted in the Vulcan manner, and he followed suit. They touched each other's faces.

"It's hard to believe," she said, "that I could be so stirred by the touch of an alien hand."

"I too—must confess—that I am moved emotionally. I know it is illogical—but…"

"Spock, we need not question what we truly feel. Accept what is happening between us, even as I do."

"I question no further."

"Come, then." Taking his hand, she turned toward the other room.

The outside door buzzed stridently. Had Spock been fully human, he would have jumped.

"Commander!" Tal's voice called. "Permission to enter!"

"Not now, Tal."

"It is urgent, Commander."

She hesitated, looking at Spock, but her mood bad-been broken. She said; "Very well—you may enter."

There were two guards behind Tal. It would have been hard to say whether they were more surprised by Spock's presence or by their Commander's state of undress, but discipline reasserted itself almost at once.

"Commander. We have intercepted an alien transmission from aboard our own vessel."

"Triangulate and report."

"We have already done so, Commander. The source is in this room."

She stiffened and turned to Spock. Gazing levelly at her, he reached under his tunic. Tal and the guards drew their weapons. Moving very slowly, Spock brought, out his communicator and proffered it to her. Trancelike, without looking away from his face, she took the device. Then, suddenly, she seemed to awaken.

"The cloaking device! Send guards…"

"We thought of that also, Commander," Tal said. The slight stress on her title dripped with contempt. It was clear that he thought it would shortly pass to him. "It is gone."

"Full alert. Search all decks."

"That will be profitless, Commander," Spock said. "I do not believe you will find it."

Her response was a cry of shock. "You must be mad!"

"I assure you, I am quite sane."

"Why would you do this to me? What are you that you could do this?"

"I am," Spock said, not without some regret, "the First Officer of the *Enterprise.*"

She struck him, full in the face. Nobody could have mistaken it for a caress. The blow would have dropped any human being like a felled ox.

He merely looked at her, his face calm. She glared back, and gradually her breathing became more even.

"Take him to my office. I shall join you shortly."

She was back in uniform now, and absolutely expressionless. "Execution for state criminals," she said, "is both painful and demeaning. I believe the details are unnecessary. The sentence will be carried out immediately after charges are recorded."

"I am not a Romulan subject," Spock said. "But if I am to be treated as one, I demand the Right of Statement first."

"So you know more about Romulan custom than you let appear. This increases your culpability. However, the right is granted."

"Thank you."

"Return to your station, Subcommander," she said to Tal. "The boarding action will begin on my order."

Tal saluted and left. The Commander took a weapon from her desk, and laid it before her. She seemed otherwise confident that Spock would make no ignominious attempts at escape; and indeed, even had the situation been as she thought, such an attempt would have been illogical.

"There is no time limit to the Right of Statement, but I will not appreciate many hours of listening to your defense."

"I will not require much time," Spock said. "No more than twenty minutes, I would say."

"It should take less time than that to find your ally who stole the cloaking device. You will not die alone." She tapped a button on the desk console. "Recording. The Romulan Right of Statement allows the condemned to make a statement of official record in defense or explanation of his crime. Commander Spock, Starfleet Officer and proven double agent, demands the right. Proceed, Commander Spock."

"My crimes are espionage, and aiding and abetting sabotage. To both of these I freely admit my guilt. However, Lords Praetori, I reject the charge of double agentry, with its further implication of treason. However I may have attempted to make the matter appear, and regardless of my degree of success in such a deception, I never at any point renounced my loyalty to the Federation, let alone swearing allegiance to the Romulan Empire.

"I was in fact acting throughout under sealed orders from Starfleet Command, whose nature was unknown to anyone aboard the *Enterprise* except, of course, Captain Kirk. These orders were to find out whether the Romulans had in fact developed a rumored cloaking device for their ships, and if so, to obtain it by any

possible means. The means actually employed were worked out in secret by Captain Kirk and myself."

"And so," the Commander said with bitter contempt, "the story that Vulcans cannot lie is a myth after all."

"Of course, Commander. Complex interpersonal relationships among sentient beings absolutely require a certain amount of lying, for the protection of others and the good of the whole. Among humans such untruths are called 'white lies.' A man's honor in this area is measured by whether he can tell the difference between a white lie and a malicious one. It is a much more delicate matter than simply charging blindly ahead telling the truth at all times, no matter what injury the truth may sometimes do. And there are occasions, such as the present one, when one must weigh a lie which will cause personal injury against a truth which would endanger the good of the whole. Your attempt to seduce and subvert me, Commander, was originally just that kind of choice. If it became something else, I am sorry, but such a danger is always present in such attempts."

"I can do without your pity," the Commander said, "and your little moral lecture. Pray proceed."

"As you wish. The oath I swore as a Starfleet officer is both explicit and binding. So long as I wear the uniform it is my duty to protect the security of the Federation. Clearly, your new cloaking device presents a threat to that security. I carried out my duty as my orders and my oath required."

"Everyone carries out his duty, Mr Spock," the Commander said. "You state the obvious."

"There is no regulation concerning the content of the statement. May I continue?"

"Very well. Your twenty minutes are almost up."

"I trust that the time consumed by your interruptions and my answers to them will not be charged against me. Interrogation in the midst of a formal Statement is most irregular."

The Commander threw up her hands. "These endless quibbles! Will you kindly get back to the point?"

"Certainly. The Commander's appeal to my Vulcan loyalties, in the name of our remote common racial origin, was bound to fail; since beyond the historic tradition of Vulcan loyalty there is the combined Vulcan/Romulan history of obedience to duty—and Vulcan is, may I remind you, a member of the United Federation of Planets. In other words…"

Under his voice, a familiar hum began to grow in the room. The Commander realized Instantly what was happening—but instead of picking up the sidearm and firing, as she had plenty of time to do despite all Spock's droning attempt to dull her attention—she sprang forward and threw her arms around him. Then both were frozen in a torrent of sparks…

And both were in the Transporter Room of the *Enterprise.*

As the elevator doors opened onto the bridge, Kirk's voice boomed out.

"Throw the switch on that device, Scotty!"

"I did, sir," Scott's voice said. "It's not working."

The Commander looked in Kirk's direction and a muffled exclamation escaped her as Spock escorted her out. Kirk had not yet removed his Romulan Centurion's uniform, let alone bothered to change his skin color or have his surgically altered ears restored to normal human shape. Obviously, the other half of the plot was now all too clear to her.

Spock left her and crossed to his station. Behind him, her voice said steadily, "I would give you credit, Captain, for getting this far—but you will be dead in a moment and the credit would be gratuitous."

The Captain ignored her. "Lt. Uhura, open a channel to the Romulan command vessel; two-way visual contact."

"Right… I have Subcommander Tal, sir."

Tal seemed quite taken aback to see what appeared to be one of his own officers in the command chair, but must have realized in the next second that any Centurion he did not recognize had to be an imposter. He said almost instantly, "We have you under our main batteries, *Enterprise.* You cannot escape."

"This is Captain Kirk under this silly outfit. Hold your fire. We have your Commander with us."

Tal shot a look toward where his own main viewscreen evidently was located. "Commander!"

"Subcommander Tal," the woman said, "I am giving you a direct order. Obey it. *Close and destroy!*"

Uhura cut off transmission, but not fast enough. It was a risk that had had to be taken.

"Come on, Scotty, we've run out of time."

"Captain, I'm working as fast as I can."

"You see, Captain," the Commander said, "your effort is wasted."

"Mr Spock. Distance from the Romulan vessels."

"One hundred fifty thousand kilometers and closing rapidly."

"Stand to phasers. You'll forgive me if I put up a fight, Commander."

"Of course," the woman said. "That is expected."

"One hundred thousand kilometers," Spock said. "They'll be within maximum range within six seconds… five… four…"

"Scott, *throw the switch!*"

"It'll likely overload, but…"

"? two… one…"

"Functioning, Captain!"

"Mr Chekov, change course to 318 mark 7, Warp Nine."

"Nine, sir?… Done."

Spock turned toward Kirk. "They have opened fire at where we were last, sir, but the cloaking device appears to be operating most effectively. And the Commander informed me that even their own sensors cannot track a vessel so equipped."

"Thank you, Mr Spock," Kirk said in a heartfelt voice. He turned to the Commander. "We will leave you at a Federation outpost."

"You are most gracious, Captain. If I may be taken to your brig, I will take my place as your prisoner. Further attendance here is painful to me."

Kirk stood, very formal. "Mr Spock, the honor of escorting the Commander to her *quarters* is yours."

The two opposing forces bowed formally to each other, and Spock led the Commander back toward the elevator. Behind them, Sulu's voice said, "Entering Neutral Zone, Captain."

"I'm sorry you were made an unwilling passenger," Spock said. "It was not intentional. All they really wanted was the cloaking device."

"They? And what did you want?"

"That is all I wanted when I went aboard your vessel."'

"And that is exactly all you came away with."

"You underestimate yourself, Commander."

She refused to hear the hidden meaning. "You realize that we will very soon learn to penetrate the cloaking device. After all, we discovered it; you only stole it."

"Obviously, military secrets are the most fleeting of all," he said. "I hope we exchange something more permanent."

She stepped into the elevator; but when Spock tried to follow her, she barred the way. "You made the choice."

"It was the only choice possible. Surely you would not have respected any other."

She looked at him for a long moment, and then smiled, slightly, sadly. "That will be our—secret. Get back to your duty. The guards had best take me from here."

Spock beckoned to two guards. She could probably incapacitate both in a matter of seconds, but they were well out of Transporter range of any of the Romulan ships now—and her mood did not seem to be one which would impel her to illogical action. In a way it was a pity that she obviously did not know that Vulcans were cyclical in their mating customs, and immune to sexual attraction at all other times. Or had she been counting on his human side? And—had she been right to do so?

The elevator swallowed her down. Spock went back to his post.

"Sickbay to Captain Kirk. If all the shouting's over up there, I want you to report to me."

"What for, Bones?"

"You're due in surgery again. As payment for the big act of irrationality you put over on me, I'm going to bob your ears."

Kirk grinned and touched the ears, which apparently he had forgotten in the heat of operations, and looked over at Spock.

"Please go, Captain," Spock said in a remote voice. "Somehow, they are not aesthetically pleasing on a human."

"Are you coming, Jim?" McCoy's voice said. "Or do you want to go through the rest of your life looking like your First Officer?"

And McCoy had the last word again.

AND THE CHILDREN SHALL LEAD*

(Edward J. Lakso) *Novelised by Judith A. Lawrence

From standard orbit, the planet Triacus appeared perfectly normal, even placid. But Starfleet Command had received a distress call. No details had been included.

"Isn't Triacus where Professor Starnes and his expedition are working?" asked Captain Kirk.

Mr Spock nodded. "It's the only M-type planet in the system. According to the records, Dr Starnes and his colleagues found it sufficiently pleasant to bring their families along."

"Starnes taught at the Academy. I remember him—nice old fellow. And knew his stuff."

"He is a very capable scientist, Captain."

"Prepare the Transporter Room. You and I and Dr McCoy will beam down in ten minutes."

"Certainly, Captain."

It was a dry, dusty sort of place to have chosen to set up camp. Rock formations emerged from the flat ground, the sun casting sharp shadows. The few listless shrubs were drab, except for the spatters of bright red blood.

Picks and water bottles lay scattered among the fallen bodies of men and women. Shocked, McCoy knelt to examine a crumpled shape that still held a weapon pointed at its own ruined head.

"Dr Starnes!" Kirk's shout burst the stunned silence. Over the rock stumbled a wild-haired middle-aged man who fell to his knees as his shaking hands held a phaser pistol aimed straight at the Captain.

"Dr Starnes! It's me, Kirk!" Unprepared, Kirk groped for his own weapon. But with an agonized twist, the man dropped and lay still. Kirk started toward him; McCoy was there before him.

"He's dead, Captain."

"He didn't seem to know me," said Kirk wonderingly. "He tried to kill me." He picked up the pistol, and nearly tripped over a woman whose body was contorted beneath her bluish face. He stooped and pried a plastic capsule from her hand. He sniffed at it doubtfully.

"Cyalodin!"

McCoy examined the capsule, then the woman. "Self-inflicted," he said briefly. "What's been going on here?"

Mr Spock had been searching the body of the professor. Now he brought over the tricorder that had been over the shoulder of the dead man, and flipped the switch.

"*? we… must destroy ourselves. The alien… upon us, the enemy from within… the enemy…*" came in a painful, choking voice. Spock snapped it off. Kirk stared around at the scene of desolation.

"All this—self-inflicted?"

McCoy nodded. "A mass suicide."

As Spock was removing the tapes from the professor's tricorder, there was a giggle. The rising trill of children's laughter sounded from behind the shrubs.

A girl and four boys poured over the rock and stopped at the sight of the *Enterprise* crew.

"Hi. Who are you?" said the tallest boy, with complete self-possession.

"Kirk, of the Starship *Enterprise*."

"I'm Tommy Starnes. This is Mary, and Steve, Ray and Don."

"Come on, play with us!" said Mary, dancing around Kirk's legs. Kirk and the others stared around them at the grisly battlefield and found themselves seized by their hands and pulled into a wild ring-around-the-rosy, pocketful of posy, and dragged into helpless crouching at "all fall down!" among the dead.

They buried the members of the Starnes exploration party in the shadow of the rock. The inscription ran:

STARNES EXPLORATION PARTY
STARDATE 5039.5
IN MEMORIAM

O'Connell
Tsiku
Linden
Jaworski
Starnes

The writing still glowed warm where it had been burned into the rock with phasers. Kirk reverently placed the United Federation of Planets green-and-red flag, with its circle of UFP symbols around a center of stars, upon the grave. The *Enterprise* men were respectful and silent; the burial detail had been profoundly shocked.

The children, standing in a stiff row, tried to look solemn, and succeeded only in looking bored. Steve nudged Mary restlessly. Mary whispered something in Don's ear. They glanced at Kirk.

Finally, Mary said in a not-quite whisper, "Let's go and *play!*" and the five disappeared in a flurry of shouting.

"What's the matter with them? No sign of grief at all," said Kirk.

"No, Jim, no indication of any kind," said McCoy gravely.

"Or fear?"

"They *seem* completely secure and unafraid. But it's possibly the effect of traumatic shock."

"I can't believe it. For a child to suppress the fact that both parents are dead…"

The dry voice of Spock remarked, "Humans do have an amazing capacity for choosing what they wish to believe—and excluding that which is painful."

"Not children, Spock. Not to this extent. It's incredible."

"What those children saw is incredible, Jim." McCoy was quietly insistent. "The way these deaths occurred, any reaction is possible, including lacunar amnesia. That's my diagnosis, until specific tests can be made."

Kirk shook his head. "I'll have to be guided by that for the present, Doctor. But surely I can question them."

"No. Certainly not until the fabric of traumatization has weakened, or you can find another explanation for their behavior. Forcing them to see this experience now could cause permanent damage. Such amnesia is a protection against the intolerable."

Kirk had to accept this. "But, Bones, whatever happened here is locked up inside those children."

The cheerful sounds of children at play had been present throughout. Now Tommy was tying a blind-fold around the eyes of Steve, the smallest boy, and the others dashed for cover behind the rocks as Tommy turned him round and

round. As Steve began to grope, Tommy tiptoed backward softly—and tripped. Steve jumped gleefully on top, crying, "Tommy, Tommy! I caught you!" The others danced out of hiding, shouting all at once.

Kirk detached Steve from Tommy's back and helped the tall boy to his feet.

"Hurt yourself?"

"Nah. I'm okay." The others were trying to reach Tommy's head with the blindfold.

"It's Tommy's turn, it's Tommy's turn!"

It was all Kirk could do to outshout them. "Children! It's time to leave here and go up to the ship."

"Oh, no, not yet. We're just beginning to have some fun! Not now, please?" came a chorus of protest.

Kirk searched their faces for some other reaction.

"I'm sorry. It's getting late. You'll have to go with Dr McCoy."

But all they did was grumble, disappointed. "Only five more minutes, huh, please? It's still Tommy's turn and everything!… And I didn't have a turn yet…"

McCoy took charge of them. They didn't look back toward the camp at all.

Kirk and Spock stood for a moment by the graves. The flag fluttered peacefully.

"If it's not lacunar amnesia that's blanking out their minds, there may be something here that is doing it."

"The attack on Professor Starnes's party must surely have been unprovoked," said Spock musingly.

"Attack? It seems to be mass suicide."

"I stand corrected, Captain. 'Induced' would be a more precise term. Induced by an outside force."

Alert, Kirk said, "Such as?"

"The release of bacteria. Or a helpless mental depression. A state of suicidal anxiety. These could be chemically induced."

"What would make the children immune?"

"I do not know. But it is a possibility, Captain. A severe form of schizophrenia leading to a helpless depressive state could be chemically created."

"With the children intentionally free."

Spock nodded. "A valid hypothesis."

"We shall have to investigate this place more thoroughly. We'll go aboard now."

Animals and children start off on the right footing in a new environment when provided immediately with a little something to stave off the pangs of starvation. Nurse Christine Chapel mounted an expedition to the Commissary. When it comes to ice cream flavors, a computer can outdo a fairy godmother.

"All right, children," said Christine, holding out a fistful of coloured cards. "Each colour means a different flavor. Take your pick and the computer will mix it; just call out your favorite."

The five voices clamored in urgent delight. "Orange-vanilla-cherry-apricot-licorice-CHOC'LIT!" she handed two cards to each child. Four of them dashed to the insert slot and jammed their cards in. The smallest, Steve, was clearly stuck. His face conveyed agonies of indecision.

"Would you like to be surprised, Stevie?" asked Nurse Chapel gently.

Relieved, he nodded. She inserted two cards at random. The read-out panel twinkled and the computer hummed, and eagerly Steve opened the little window and withdrew a heaping dish.

He looked up at her from somewhere around her knees with tear-filled eyes. He said sorrowfully, "But it's coconut and vanilla. It's all *white!*"

She patted him. "There, there now, Stevie. There are unpleasant surprises as well as pleasant ones. That was your unpleasant surprise. Now what would you like for the pleasant one?"

There is nothing like knowing what you don't want, after all, for clarifying a decision. Stevie said, loud and clear, "Chocolate wobble and pistachio."

"Coming right up." The crisis was past.

"And peach."

Trying not to think about it, Christine submitted the required cards to the machine. "Oh, this is going to be a wonderful surprise."

Not vastly surprised, Steve accepted the huge mound of colours with satisfaction and trotted off to join the others at the table. The clinking of spoons and chatter overwhelmed the voices of Kirk and McCoy, who stood watching in the doorway.

"The tests show no, evidence of tension due to lying," said McCoy glumly. "They behave as if nothing were wrong. Physically, they check out completely sound. And there's no sign of any biochemical substance to account for their present state. I have no answers, Jim."

"There has to be an answer." Kirk stared at the laughing group, absorbed in ice cream.

"Why can't it wait till we get to Starbase Hospital, where they can be checked by a child specialist? I'm no pediatrician."

"We're not leaving here till I know what went on—or what's going on."

McCoy shrugged. "Well, I won't *forbid* you to question them. But it could harm them."

"It could be far worse for them if I don't—and for us too."

McCoy gave him an uncertain glance. "Be careful, Jim."

Kirk nodded and eased his way over to the table, where there was much scraping of last bits from bottoms of bowls.

"? and after this we can play games," Christine Chapel was saying cheerfully.

"Mmmm, yeah… that was fun… some *more*…" surfaced from the general babble.

"Well, well," said Kirk, smiling. "You seem to be having such a good time over here, I think I'll join you. Is that all right?"

"Please do," said Mary formally.

"I'll have a dish too—a little one. A very little one," he said to Christine.

"Of course."

"Very little," he said meaningfully. And then to the children, "This is better than Triacus, isn't it?" Five faces turned to him with the look of disappointed resignation that children give to hopeless adults. "That dirty old planet?" said Don scornfully.

Ray's snub nose wrinkled so hard as to nearly disappear. "What's to like about that place?"

Mary explained. "You weren't there very long, Captain. You don't know."

"I don't think your parents liked it much either."

"Yes, they did," said Tommy quickly, echoed by, "Mine sure did. Mine too."

Don summed it up. "Parents like stupid things." Christine Chapel saw an opportunity. "I don't know about that. Parents like children."

"Ha," said Mary. "That's what you think."

"I'm sure your parents loved you," said Kirk. "That's why they took you with them all the way to Triacus, so you wouldn't be so far away for so long a time. That would have made them unhappy; they would miss you. Wouldn't you miss them too?"

The children looked at each other, and away. They squirmed. Tommy looked thoughtful for a split second and then said, grinning, "Bizzy! Bizzy, bizzy!"

It exploded into laughter as they all joined in. "Bizzy-bizzy-bizzy-bizzy…" They jumped up and chased around the room, bumping each other and shouting, "Bizzy, bizzy, bizzy!" Don called, "Guess what we are?"

"A swarm of bees!" said Christine.

They shook their heads and screamed with laughter. Mary's voice rose above them all, crying, "Watch out! I'll sting you!"

"A swarm of adults," said Kirk softly. The laughter missed a beat, and rose shrilly. Kirk caught Mary as she careened into him with a face of near-fury. "Now wait a minute…"

Tommy said hastily, "Can we have some more ice cream, please?"

"I don't think so," said Kirk, slowly releasing the little girl. "It would spoil your dinner."

"See what I told ya? They *all* say it." The children gathered behind Tommy, who stood there, a young captain ready to defend his crew, Kirk thought. The boy was a leader. But why this… sense of opposition?

"All right, children," he said. "You've had a full day. I think you could use some rest. Nurse Chapel will see you to your quarters."

"A very good idea, Captain," said Christine with some relief. There had been tension building up in the room. She herded them toward the door through the "Awwws" and "Do we have tos."

Kirk called to Tommy. "Just a moment. I'd like to ask you something." McCoy had quietly joined the Captain at the table. Tommy reluctantly sat down on the other side.

"Tommy, will you tell me what you saw?"

"Saw where?"

"By the rocks. On Triacus."

Tommy shrugged. "You were there," he said indifferently.

"Did you see your father today?"

"I saw'm."

"Did he seem upset?"

"Yeah, he was very upset."

"What about?"

"I didn't ask him." How could he get through this almost sullen resistance and reach the boy?

"What was going on that would have upset him?"

Tommy looked at Kirk distantly. "How should I know? He was always upset. Just like you, Captain Kirk."

"I'm not upset with you or your friends, Tommy. We invited you aboard the *Enterprise*. Why would I do that if I didn't like you?"

"You had your reasons," said the boy in a voice too old for him.

Kirk tried another tack. "Are you unhappy about leaving Triacus?"

"That place? That's for adults."

"Aren't you sorry about… about leaving your parents?"

"My parents?" said Tommy, amazed. "They love it down there. Always bizzy. They're happy." He wriggled to his feet. "Can I please go now? I'm tired too, you know."

Kirk sighed. "Yes, certainly. I'll take you."

"I know the way."

They let him go. "Round one to the young contender," said McCoy.

"Almost a knockout," agreed Kirk. "It's as if the parents were strangers to them. But—" he flipped the switch on the communicator. "Kirk to Security. Post a guard on the children. They're to be kept under constant watch."

But neither officers, guards nor crew heard the soft sound of chanting from Tommy's room: *Hail, hail, fire and snow,*

Call the angel, we will go,

Far away, far to see,

Friendly angel, come to me.

Perhaps they were saying their prayers.

Kirk passed a restless night. The memory of little Mary dancing on her mother's grave kept returning to haunt him. If he had not seen the tragedy, he would never have suspected any trouble at all from the Children's attitude. It was all very well to talk of lacunar amnesia, but there was an undercurrent of horror that he could not shake.

And the doctor had found no signs of Spock's "chemically induced" derangement.

The viewscreen on the bridge showed the expected image of Triacus, just distant enough for the details of the landscape to be blurred.

"Mr Sulu?"

"Maintaining standard orbit, Captain," said Sulu, pleased to give an "all's well" report to the tired face of his commander.

"Lieutenant Uhura, is there any report from the planet security team?"

"Everything is quiet, sir." Everything quiet, everything in order. Why this sense of unease?

Mr Spock appeared at his elbow. "Captain, I have extracted the salient portion of Professor Starnes's tapes."

"Good." Kirk moved to Spock's console.

"Among the technical facts he gathered, Professor Starnes also offers some rather… unscientific hypotheses." Spock's voice expressed distrust.

"Let's see them, Mr Spock."

"*? Log date, 5025.3. Ever since our arrival on Triacus, I've had a growing feeling of uneasiness*. The distinguished man on the screen glanced around him. "*At first, I attributed it to the usual case of nerves commonly associated with any new project. However, I found that the rest of my associates were also bothered by these anxieties*."

Kirk and Spock exchanged a puzzled glance. On the screen, Dr Starnes licked his lips and hurried on.

"*The only ones not affected are the children, bless them, who are finding the whole thing an exciting adventure.*" For a moment, the trouble left his face and he smiled*. "Ah, to be young again!*"

"Are there more of these unscientific hypotheses, Mr Spock?"

Spock nodded briefly.

"*? 5032.4 The feeling of anxiety we've all been experiencing is growing worse. It seems to be most intense close to the camp, in fact. There is a cave in the rocks in which we have been sheltering part of the time; I have ordered Professor Wilkins to begin excavating. There are signs that the area was once inhabited, and perhaps there is an explanation to be found*."

Spock switched off the tricorder. "There is another portion, Captain, which I believe you'll find particularly interesting." He adjusted the mechanism.

"*? 5038.3 Professor Wilkins completed his excavation today. Although whatever civilization that might have been here was destroyed by a natural catastrophe, as described in notebooks 7 through 12 of our records, it would appear that… took refuge in the cave… all our efforts, we are becoming more apprehensive… as if some unseen force… influ—…*" The recording had gradually begun fading and bleeping. Now the professor's mouth went on moving, but only a high whistling emerged from the tricorder. As Spock bent over it to try to adjust the settings, even the image blurred.

"What happened?" said Kirk.

"Unknown," replied Spock, frowning over his instrument. Kirk heard a soft step behind him.

Tommy smiled, all boyish freckles.

"I didn't see you come in, Tommy," said Kirk.

"I had something to say to you, Captain. After we leave here, can you take us to Marcos Twelve?"

"No, Tommy, we'll probably take you to a Federation Starbase."

Urgently, Tommy said, "But I have relatives on Marcos Twelve."

"I'm sorry, but Marcos Twelve isn't within our patrol area. Mr Spock, we'll continue in my quarters." Spock was still inspecting the tricorder. He now removed the tape.

"Oh, Captain," said Tommy, looking wonderingly around the bridge at the consoles, the flashing lights, the complex equipment. "Can I stay here and watch?" For a moment, Kirk forgot the problem the boy represented, and remembered his own enchantment the first time he had been taken aboard a Starship. "I'll be very quiet," the boy added hopefully.

"All right, Tommy. Lieutenant Uhura, please ask Dr McCoy to report to my quarters for a brief conference."

The last Kirk saw of Tommy, he was heading for Kirk's own chair—going to play Captain. Kirk smiled at Mary as he and Spock passed her at the door.

"I wonder where the rest of them are."

"Playing, no doubt," said Spock, still looking at the malfunctioning tricorder as they walked. "It seems to be a thing they do. Most illogical."

"Of course, Mr Spock."

Mr Scott woke up ten minutes late and just a little irritated with himself. He stomped to the Engineering Room and picked up his clipboard, glaring at the two technicians who were on duty. Suddenly, he stopped dead in front of an indicator.

"And when did we change course?"

One of the technicians turned and looked at him curiously. "We haven't changed course."

"What d'ye mean we haven't changed course? Look at your bridge control monitor!"

Mildly puzzled, the technician replied, "We're still in orbit, sir."

"Have you gone completely blind? Tha's no' orbiting position!" Scott reached over to the controls.

The technician seized his hand and thrust it aside. "Don't touch the controls, sir," he said quietly.

"What the devil d'ye think ye're doin'?" Scott snatched his hand back.

"We must remain in this orbit until the bridge orders are changed."

"You blind fuil, can't ye see what's in front of ye? We're not in orbit!" Mr Scott lunged toward the controls again.

"I will not disobey an order from the bridge," reiterated the technician firmly. He placed himself squarely before the console, barring Scott.

"You are disobeying an order from the bridge! Now step aside!" What ailed the man? Triacus was nowhere in sight; the readings showed the *Enterprise* moving through space at Warp Two.

"You're losing control of yourself, sir," said the second technician carefully and very gently.

"Not yet!" Scott's voice had become a growl as he drew back his fist. He ducked the blow aimed at his chin and connected satisfyingly with the solar plexus of the first technician, who doubled up and backed away. The second man was on Scott at once, and furiously Scott swung and knocked him down.

Unfortunately, the first man had recovered and dispatched Mr Scott with a neat blow from behind. The two technicians glanced at his fallen body and turned back to their consoles.

Little Don stared down at the big man lying on the floor. His white teeth flashed in a proud grin.

In Kirk's quarters, the tricorder was functioning again.

"*? I'm being influenced to do things that don't make sense. I've even gone so far as to call Starfleet Command to request a spaceship to be used as a transport*." Professor Starnes had entirely lost composure; his eyes had grown dull in deep caverns under his brows. "*It was only when I couldn't tell them what I wanted to transport that I began to realize that my mind was being… directed. I decided to send a dispatch to Starfleet, warning them… God forgive us! We must destroy ourselves..The alien is upon us! The enemy from within, the enemy…*" The cracked voice faded.

"He never completed the entry. And that dispatch was never sent—only scenes of family life, games and picnics with the children. That is the complete record." Spock was sober as he rewound the tapes. "Whatever overwhelmed them must have done so with incredible speed, or the professor would have provided details of the experience. He was an excellent scientist and tireless in the pursuit of the truth."

"A high tribute coming from you, Mr Spock. But that could be what destroyed him."

Spock stared at Kirk. "The truth destroy? I don't follow that. Captain. It seems to be a non sequitur. The pursuit of truth is the noblest activity."

"Of course, of course. But the revelation of truth had often been fought, and fought hard."

"He's only too right, Spock," said McCoy.

"Unfortunately, I am compelled to agree. Evil seeks to maintain power by the suppression of truth." Slowly, Spock added, "Or by misleading the innocent."

With a sense of nearing enlightenment, Kirk said, "I wonder…?"

"Do you mean the children?" said McCoy.

"Yes, Doctor."

There was a short silence, broken by the Captain. "Spock, what do we know about the race that lived here?"

"Legends, Captain. They say that Triacus was the seat of a band of marauders who made constant war throughout the system of Epsilon Indi. After many centuries, these destroyers were themselves destroyed by those they had preyed upon."

"Is that the end of it?"

"No. Like so many legends, this too has a frightening ending. It warns that the evil is awaiting a catalyst to set it in motion once again and send it marauding across the galaxy."

The three officers looked at one another. "Is it possible that this… evil… has found its catalyst?"

"I was speaking of a legend, Captain," said Spock severely.

"But most legends have their bases in fact, Mr Spock."

"I think I read you, Jim," said McCoy. "But as Medical Officer, I must warn you that unless the normal grief is tapped and released from these children, you're treading dangerously."

"I'll respect your diagnosis, Bones. But not to the exclusion of the safety of the *Enterprise*. Thank you. Mr Spock, what other expeditions have visited Triacus?"

"According to Federation records, this is the first."

"What was that about an 'unseen force'? Starnes said it was influencing him, he had recognized and was beginning to fight it…"

"And he had canceled his request for a ship," said Spock.

"The ship! Yes, a ship for Triacus. But why? Transport was wanted, but by whom?"

With decision, Kirk addressed the communicator. "Security Detachment. Ready for relief duty on Triacus. Assemble in the Transporter Room immediately." He added, more to himself than to the others, "I'll have some questions for the first detachment as soon as they've beamed up. It's about time we found out whether Starnes's 'enemy within' is on the planet below—or here on board."

In the Transporter Room, two guards were already standing on the platform. Spock went to the controls. As Captain Kirk told the men that their tour of duty would be one hour, they looked at each other with astonishment—and then uneasiness. "Be ready with your communicators at all times to report any signs of alien beings. Don't wait to investigate. Is that clear?" The men nodded. "Beam down the guards."

Mr Spock pulled the lever; the guards shimmered, began to fade and were gone. "Beam up the Security Detachment from Triacus."

The flickering figures on the platform faded, returned, faded. Where there should have been two solid security guards, there was only scintillating light.

"What's wrong?" said Kirk sharply.

"I am unable to lock on to the proper coordinates, Captain."

"Why not?"

"It appears we are no longer orbiting Triacus."

"But that's impossible." As the information sank in, Kirk said with horror, "If we're not orbiting Triacus, those men I just beamed down are dead."

"Captain, we are no longer orbiting Triacus."

"Activate the bridge monitor screen." Mr Sulu was sitting placidly at his console, with Tommy watching interestedly. Uhura was smiling at little Mary. "Captain to bridge. Mr Sulu, we are not in orbit around Triacus."

"With all respects, Captain," replied Sulu, surprised, "you're wrong. I have Triacus on my screen right now."

"You're off course. I'm coming up there."

He merely glanced at the children as he hurried to Sulu's station, followed by Spock.

"Mr Sulu, your controls are not in orbiting position."

"But we are in orbit. Look." The screen showed the planet serenely below them.

"So it would appear," said Spock.

Behind them, the children had begun to play some game. Mary's voice chanted, "*Hail, hail, fire and snow…*" as the other three gathered in the doorway. They formed a circle and joined hands, clasping and unclasping in a complicated pattern. Kirk was aware of them only as a background distraction.

"Mr Scott! This is Kirk. Look at your course override. What is our heading?"

The answer came blandly through the intercom. "Marcos Twelve, Captain."

Marcos Twelve! Kirk glanced at the circle of children. "*? Far away, far to see…*"

"Why have you changed course, Mr Scott?"

"According to your order, Captain." The intercom clicked off.

". . . *Friendly angel, come to me…*"

"Mr Scott! Scotty!"

The lights on the bridge dimmed slightly and took on a greenish tinge. In the circle of children, something was forming in the air, not with the familiar shimmer of a transporter beam, but eerily, gradually, the figure of a silver-haired, sweet-faced manlike being clad in a glittering cloak took shape. It spoke to the children.

"*You have done well, my friends. I, Gorgan, am very proud. You have done what you must do. As you believe, so shall you do*."

Softly, the children replied in chorus, "*As we believe, so shall we do*."

"*Marcos Twelve has millions of people on it. Nearly a million will be our friends*." The figure smiled benignly. "*The rest will become our enemies. Together with our friends, we will destroy them as we destroyed our enemies on Triacus*." It glowed with satisfaction. "*A million friends from Marcos Twelve will make us invincible. We can do anything we wish in the whole universe. It will be all ours to play in, and no one can interfere. All ours, my friends!*"

It spread out its hands. "*Now we have come to a moment of crisis. The enemy has discovered our operation. But they*

are too late! They no longer control the ship—we do. We shall prevail! They will take us wherever we desire.

"*As you believe, so shall you do*."

The children, gazing raptly at the figure, replied, "*As we believe, so shall we do*."

"*Each of you will go to your stations. Maintain your controls. If resistance comes, you know what to do. Call upon their Beasts! Their Beasts will serve us well. In each one of our enemies is the Beast which will consume him.*

"*Remember how it was on Triacus? If they resist, so shall it be on the Enterprise. If you need me, call me, and I, Gorgan, will appear. We make ready for our new beginning on Marcos Twelve. We must not falter…*

"*As you believe, so shall it be, so shall it be…*" The creature smiled sweetly upon the children and slowly faded.

Mr Spock's eyebrow lifted in astonishment. Kirk was unable to move for a paralyzed moment, and in that moment, Tommy whispered orders to the others.

"Go to your stations. Mary, you remain here with me." Don, Steve and Ray whisked out the door as Mary seated herself near Uhura.

Kirk spoke gently to Sulu. "Helmsman, disregard what you see—whatever you think you see—on your screen. Set a course for Starbase 4." Sulu's hands jerked. He froze, blood draining from his face as he stared at the screen.

"Helmsman, do you hear me?"

Sulu managed to whisper, "Yes, sir." Kirk, relieved, ignored Tommy's mutter.

". . . *See, see, what shall he see…*" The boy's eyes glittered with concentration.

"Lieutenant Uhura, contact Starbase 4. Tell them we are bringing the children back. Tell Starfleet Command that I suspect them of being alien in nature and I want a thorough investigation made on our arrival."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Uhura briskly and turned to her board. She stopped. She began shivering as her hands went to touch her face, her eyes fixed on her console.

"Lieutenant!" said Kirk sharply. Then more gently "What are you staring at?" Uhura moaned.

"My death," whispered the beautiful Bantu. "A long, long death. Ancient with disease and pain. Disease and death." Her

voice rose to a scream. "I see my death!"

Kirk stared at her console. For a fleeting second, he saw Uhura's face, hideously disfigured and nearly bald, a gray mass of wrinkles. But as he blinked, the station was its usual neat assembly of equipment.

"There's nothing there but your communicators," he said.

She was whimpering. "God help me. Please don't let it, Captain. Don't let it be!"

Kirk's glance fell on Mary, hunched up in total concentration. She was singing very softly. "*? shall she see… a dying old hag where a girl should be…*"

Uhura moaned, touched her smooth young face and stared in paralyzed horror.

"Spock, you make the call to Starfleet." Kirk turned helplessly away from Uhura's anguish, only to see Sulu's eyes staring wildly at his screen.

"Sulu, I ordered you to change course!" Kirk strode to the station and reached for the controls.

Sulu struck his hand away. "Captain! Sir!" His eyes never strayed from his screen. "Stay away from the controls! Or we'll be destroyed!"

"But Mr Sulu, there's nothing there!" said Kirk angrily.

"Can't you see them? The missiles? They're coming at us by thousands!"

"There are no missiles, Mr Sulu." Kirk reached for the console. Sulu struck him away.

"Leave them alone! If we touch anything, we will be hit! You'll kill us all!"

Spock's voice came coolly from behind him. "Captain, why are we bothering Starfleet?"

What had happened to his crew? Could nobody take an order at all—even Spock? His First Officer met his look defiantly.

"This bridge is under complete control," said Spock. "There's no need to alert Starfleet."

"Take a look around you," said Kirk. Sulu, staring fixedly at his viewscreen, blind to everything but the terror-image before him; Uhura, crouching in agony at her console; and Tommy, whose freckled boy-face had taken on a look of unrelenting hardness. Spock closed his eyes. Kirk watched

him anxiously as he stood shuddering very slightly, fighting to regain control of his mind.

Tommy too began to shudder. Spock opened his eyes and returned to the Communications station. He reached for the instruments. His hands stopped.

"I cannot obey your order, Captain," he said.

Kirk opened the intercom. "Send up two security guards." When they appeared in the doorway, he said, Take Mr Sulu to his quarters."

The guards looked at him blankly.

"You wanted us, sir?"

"Take Mr Sulu to his quarters. Now!" The guards simply stood there, looking bewildered. Kirk began to grow angry. "I gave you an order. Take Mr Sulu to his quarters at once and don't just stand there like a couple of… What the hell's the matter with you?" The guards looked at one another and shrugged.

"Must be some sort of joke," said one.

Kirk shouted furiously. "Can't you hear me? I will have my orders obeyed immediately, d'you hear?" He lunged at the guard. The man shoved him back calmly and the two coolly departed. Kirk started after them, only to find himself restrained by Mr Spock. He stood for a moment, undecided. His eye fell on Tommy.

Kirk knew who to blame for this mess. He strode toward the boy, his hand raised. If ever any kid was asking for a good walloping…

And he couldn't do it. He couldn't hit a little boy. The little boy smiled with satisfaction.

Kirk turned back to Spock. His knees buckled in reaction to the waves of adrenalin that had been pouring through him. He had to hold Spock's arm for support.

"Captain, we must get off this bridge." Spock guided him, stumbling, into the elevator.

Kirk felt cold sweat on his forehead. Not even Spock obeyed orders. The ship was out of control. His crew had gone mad, or mutinous. He was losing command, even of his own legs. Fear grew in him, and he lurched, clinging to Spock. He couldn't trust Spock, though. He couldn't trust anyone. He couldn't command a single crewman. He had lost the *Enterprise*.

"I'm losing command," he muttered, sweating again, the heat of fear overcoming the coldness. His legs were strong, strong, but wouldn't hold him up. He stared at the treacherous satanic face of his First Officer. "I'm alone, I'm alone. This ship… it's sailing on and on… without me…" He touched the wall of the elevator, trying to get a grip on it. "I'm losing command. I'm losing command! My ship… my ship…"

"Captain."

"I've lost the *Enterprise*. No… no…" he sobbed. Spock caught him as he sagged, and held him upright.

"Jim."

The shock of that voice calling him by name was a shower of cold water. Slowly, the hysteria began to ebb.

"I've got command?" he whispered, looking to the Vulcan for reassurance. Spock nodded with vast conviction.

"I've got command." Kirk's own voice was regaining strength.

"Correct, Captain," said Spock firmly, allowing no further doubt. "I am awaiting orders, Captain. Where to?"

Kirk tested his legs. They were steady. He let go of Spock and stood up. "*? in each one… is the Beast—which—will consume him.*" Well, he had met his Beast. So had Spock. Between them they had conquered the enemies within—themselves. Now the enemy within the *Enterprise* remained.

"To Auxiliary Control, my Vulcan friend. This ship is off course."

They entered the Engineering Room. Scotty looked up, smiled blandly and nodded.

"Mr Scott. I want you to override the bridge navigation system and plot a course for Starbase 4."

"I can't do that, sir!" said Scott with indignation.

"Why not?"

"These are vurra sensitive instruments. I'll no' have you upsetting their delicate balance." There was a hint of panic underlying the burring voice. "There'll be no tamperin' with the navigation system of this ship, Captain."

"I'm not asking you to tamper with it. I'm ordering you to plot a course!"

"You're ordering suicide. We'd all be lost, forever lost!" Scott grabbed a wrench from the tools stacked nearby. The two technicians loomed supportively behind him.

Spock looked at the corner of the room. Steve was quietly watching.

"I've given you men an order," said Kirk.

Scott crouched over his console, brandishing the wrench.

"You go 'way now. Go away or I'll kill you!" Kirk could not believe such words coming from his Chief Engineer, who was coming more and more to resemble a caveman with upraised club.

"Scotty, listen to me," the Captain urged. "The *Enterprise* has been invaded by alien beings. Its destination is now Marcos. If we go there, millions will die, the way they died on Triacus."

Scott snarled and lunged. The technicians jumped Spock, undeterred by his strength. Neither Spock nor Kirk was prepared to inflict serious damage on the men, but the Engineering crew had no such qualms. At last, thanks to the Vulcan nerve pinch and some quick dodging, they managed to make their way to the elevator.

Spock stared searchingly at Kirk. Still panting from the scuffle, Kirk knew what the question was.

"It's all right, Spock. My… Beast… is finished. It won't return."

Spock acknowledged this with a nod. "But, Captain, as long as those children are present, there is danger. They are the carriers."

Sometimes, Kirk thought, Spock was more human than at other times.

"But they're children, Spock. Not alien beings. Only children, being misled."

"They are followers. Without followers, evil cannot spread."

This was definitely one of the other times. "They're *children*," Kirk said helplessly.

"Captain, the four hundred and thirty men and women on board the *Enterprise*, and the ship itself, are endangered by these… *children*." Spock was grim.

"They don't understand the evil they're doing."

"Perhaps that is true. But the evil within them is spreading fast, and unless we can find a way to remove it—"

Reluctantly, Kirk faced it. "We'll have to kill them." He knew Spock was right. As they turned the corner, the way was blocked.

Ensign Chekov, armed with a phaser and flanked by three crewmen, stood in front of them.

"Captain Kirk," said Chekov nervously.

"What is it, Ensign?"

"I have been instructed to place you and Meester Spock under arrest."

"By whose order?"

"Starfleet Command, sir." With his free hand, he thrust a printed communication at the Captain, who glanced at it and looked back at the young officer.

"Where did you hear this order?" Chekov's face was working with some inner torment. Down the corridor, Tommy waited.

"Now listen to me," said Kirk firmly. "This order is false. I want you and your men to return to your stations."

"I am sorry, Captain, but I must inseest that you and Meester Spock come weeth me to the detention section."

"Listen to me!" said Kirk, taking a step toward him. The rifle rose and pointed at his heart.

"Do not force me to keel you, sir. I weel if I have to," said Chekov desperately. Heavy perspiration ran down his forehead. "Will you come peacefully?"

"Listen to me. This is a false order."

"I have never disobeyed an order, Captain," cried Chekov. "Never, never!"

"I know that. Ensign. You have never disobeyed an order. But an alien being is aboard this ship—"

"I cannot disobey, I cannot disobey an order," wailed Chekov, the rifle wavering. Spock had worked his way around the group and suddenly seized the weapon. It was a signal for the other crewmen to attack, and once again Kirk and Spock found themselves entangled in flying fists and vicious blows.

Tommy watched, concentrating and strained, as the rifle traveled from hand to hand.

Suddenly, Spock emerged from the melee holding the phaser. Tommy had vanished.

Feeling his bruises, Kirk said, "Mr Spock, take these men to detention and then join me on the bridge." Spock gestured with the phaser and the others slowly started moving, looking dazed.

The bridge was as he had left it: Uhura rocking back and forth, keening, Sulu staring.

"Marcos Twelve in sight, sir," he said dully.

"Mr Sulu, we are not going to Marcos Twelve. I want you to change course."

"No, Captain, no!" As Kirk approached the console, Sulu drew his pistol.

"Sulu, there is no collision possible. It's being planted in your mind, on your screen."

Sulu growled. Kirk stopped, startled. Spock and McCoy entered on this tableau.

"The prisoners are in the deten…" Spock's voice trailed off as he took in the impasse at Sulu's console. He stepped toward Kirk. Sulu raised his pistol to cover both of them.

"Stand back, Mr Spock."

Kirk nodded. Then he looked at Mary, and at Tommy.

"The *Enterprise* will never reach Marcos Twelve. You will not be landed there."

"The crew will take us," said Tommy contemptuously. "The crew believe us."

"The, crew! They don't understand. When they understand as I do, they will not take you to Marcos."

"They will!" cried Mary passionately. "They-will-they-will-they-will!"

Tommy's head was high. "We are going to Marcos. We are all going to Marcos. The crew will follow our friend."

Kirk spoke compassionately. "Your friend. Oh, yes, your friend. Where is that stowaway? Why does he hide?"

"He'll come if we call him," said Mary stoutly.

"But we won't," Tommy broke in. "We don't need him. We're not afraid of you."

"Good," said Kirk. "I'm glad you're not afraid of me. But your… er… leader is afraid. What's he so afraid of?"

"He's not afraid of anybody!"

"He's not afraid of anything!"

"He's afraid to be seen. When the crew see and hear him, they will know he is not their friend, and they will no longer follow."

Tommy shouted, "He *is* our friend!"

"Then let him show himself. Bring him out. Let him prove that he's MY friend and I'll—I'll follow him to Marcos Twelve and the end of the universe!"

"No!" cried Tommy. He was beginning to doubt.

An idea struck Kirk. "Mr Spock, play back the chant. The one the children sang before, when the alien appeared." Unmistakably, Spock conveyed approval. Dr McCoy shook his head doubtfully.

The chant began: *Hail, hail, fire and snow,*

Call the angel, we will go,

Far away, far to see,

Friendly angel, come to me.

Hail, hail, fire and snow…

As the chant replayed, Steve, Don and Ray came in slowly. The children drew into a group. This time, they didn't seem to want to join hands.

"The time has come to see the world as it is," said Kirk.

The shimmering form of the alien began to gather strength.

"*Who has summoned me?*" The deep resonant voice penetrated even the nightmare in which Uhura was lost.

"I did, Gorgan. My Beast has gone. It lost its power in the light of reality. I command again. And I ordered you here." It was high time, thought Kirk, that we met this antagonist face to face.

The alien smiled with infinite sweetness. "*No, Captain. I command here. My followers are strong and faithful. And obedient*." He beamed on the children, who huddled closer together. "*That is why we can take what is ours, wherever we go.*"

Spock said, "You can only take from those who do not know you."

"And we know you," said Kirk.

"*Then you know I must win, Captain*."

"Not if we join together to fight you."

The alien shook its silver head calmly. "*Foolish, foolish. You will be destroyed. I would ask you to join me, but you are too gentle. A grave weakness*."

"We are also very strong."

"*But your strength is neutralized by gentleness. You are weak and full of goodness*." The alien face had no difficulty in

conveying contempt. "*You are like the parents. You must be eliminated*."

The children stared silently at this confrontation. Kirk wondered if they were beginning to hear the hollow crack of breaking promises. They certainly looked as if the words of their "angel" were not quite what they had expected.

"Children," said Kirk suddenly, not taking his eyes off the alien, "I have some pictures of some of you on Triacus. I'd like to show them to you."

Tommy appeared to hesitate; it must have seemed an odd time for home movies. But events were moving too fast for him. The other children were frankly bewildered.

"Mr Spock, the pictures."

"*I forbid it!*" said Gorgan.

"Why should you fear it?"

"*I fear nothing!*"

"So we were told. Mr Spock, the children are waiting."

The film on the big screen showed Tommy and his father playing volleyball with the others. The remains of a picnic were strewn on the ground. Tommy stumbled and fell, and before he could decide whether or not to howl, his father had run to him and picked him up tenderly.

"There's me!" cried Mary. The children murmured as they recognized themselves.

The picture changed to the charnel house scene that had met the *Enterprise* officers on Triacus. There was a collective gasp; then the graves and the inscriptions. Tommy rubbed his eyes. The little ones were very still.

"*They would not help transport us. They were against us*." Was the creature's voice acquiring a *whine?* "*They had to be eliminated.*"

"Tommy's father would have destroyed you, but he recognized you too late," Spock stated flatly.

Gorgan rallied. "*You are also too late. The kind ones always are*."

"Not always. Not this time." Kirk looked at the children. Were those very bright eyes filling with tears at last?"You can't hide from them. They see you as you are. Even the children learn."

Gorgan summoned up an erratically brighter light around his cloaked body. He called to the children. "*You are my future*

generals. Together we will raise armies of followers. Go to your posts! Our first great victories are upon us! You will see, we have millions of followers on Marcos Twelve!"

The children looked at the flickering figure with tear-blind eyes. The alien began to shout. "*We shall exterminate all who oppose us!*"

"*As you believe, so shall it be*." As their belief waned, doubt began to creep as if it were an ugly bruise over the face of the "angels." The sweet false face was curdling.

"Don't be afraid," said Kirk. "Look at him!" McCoy was bending over the little group of sobbing children. The picture of the graves still hung on the screen. Tommy looked from the screen to the writhing alien, and back; he was holding his lower lip hard with his teeth.

"*We must exterminate! Follow me!*" Gorgan's head had erupted with hideous blotches.

"Without you, children, he is nothing," said Kirk. "He can no longer hide the evil Beast within himself."

"*I command you, I command you…*" the mellifluous voice cracked and roughened. "*? to your posts… carry out your duties, or I will destroy you. You too will be swept aside…*" quavered the dreadful thing in the shimmering cloak.

"How ugly he really is. Look at him, and don't be afraid." Kirk's hand was on Tommy's shoulder, which was shaking.

"*Death, death, death to you all…*" it died away in a scream of pure, weak anger.

McCoy looked up. "They're crying, Jim. They're finally crying! It's good to see."

Tommy was clinging to Kirk. He had broken down and was weeping convulsively. "M-my father—"

"It's all right, Tommy. It's all right. It is, isn't it, Bones?"

"Yes," replied the Doctor, picking up the nearest child. "We can help them now."

Trembling, Uhura raised her head and looked uncertainly at her console. She touched it wonderingly. But her attention was claimed by a very small nose being blown on her small skirt.

Sulu, in his own voice but sounding puzzled, said, "Marcos Twelve is dead ahead, sir."

"Reverse course, Mr Sulu."

“Aye, aye, sir!” Slowly he reached for the controls, wary eyes on his screen.

“Course reversed!” he announced with triumph.

“Set a course for Starbase 4.” How many times, today had he given that order, Kirk wondered. It was good to see it obeyed.

He had command.

SPOCK'S BRAIN

(Lee Cronin)

The curiously elegant spaceship depicted on the *Enterprise* screen had failed to respond to any hailing frequency or to approved interstellar symbols.

Nor was its shape familiar. Scanning it, Spock said, "Design unidentified. Ion propulsion, neutron conversion of a unique technology."

Kirk said, "Magnification Ten, Mr Chekov."

But the close-up revealed the ship as mysterious as before—a long, slender, needle-thin splinter of glow against the blackness of space.

"Well, Scotty?"

"It beats me, Captain. I've never seen anything like it. But isn't she a beauty?" He whistled in awed admiration. "And ion propulsion at that. Whoever they are, they could show us a thing or two."

"Life form readings, Mr Spock?"

"One, sir. Humanoid or similar. Low level of activity. Life support systems functioning. Interior atmosphere conventional nitrogen oxygen." He peered more closely at his scanner. "Just a minute, Captain…"

"Yes, Mr Spock?"

"Instruments indicate a transferal beam emanating from the humanoid life form."

"Directed to where?"

"To here sir—the bridge of the *Enterprise*."

People moved uneasily at their stations. Kirk spoke into the intercom. "Security guard! To the bridge!"

But even as he issued the order, a figure had begun to take shape among them. It gathered substance. A superbly beautiful woman stood in the precise center of the bridge. She was clad in a short, flowing, iridescent tunic, a human woman in all aspects save

in her extraordinary loveliness. On her arm she wore a bracelet, studded with varicolored cabochon jewels or buttons. She was smiling faintly.

Her appearance, no Transporter Room materialization, was as mysterious as the ship.

Kirk spoke. "I am Captain James T. Kirk. This is the Starship *Enterprise*."

She pressed a button on the bracelet. There was a humming sound. The bridge lights dimmed, brightened, dimmed again; and with the look of amazement still on their faces, Kirk, Spock and Scott went stiff, paralyzed. Then they crumpled to the floor. The humming sound passed out into the corridor. Again, lights flickered. Three running security guards stumbled—and fell. The humming grew louder. It moved into Sickbay where McCoy and Nurse Chapel were examining a patient. Once more, lights faded. When they brightened, McCoy, the nurse and the patient had slumped into unconsciousness.

Silence flowed in on the *Enterprise*.

Still smiling, the beautiful intruder glanced down at Kirk. She stepped over him to examine Scott's face. Then she left him to approach Spock. The smile grew in radiance as she stooped over him.

Nobody was ever to estimate accurately the duration of their tranced state. Gradually, as awareness returned to Kirk, he saw that other heads around him had recovered the power to lift themselves.

"What—where—" he asked disconnectedly.

Sulu put the question. "What happened?"

Kirk pulled himself back up into his command chair.

"Status, Mr Sulu?"

Mechanically Sulu checked his board. "No change from the last reading, sir."

"Mr Spock?"

There was no Mr Spock at The Vulcan's station to reply. Perplexed, Kirk looked at Scott. "The girl," Scott said dazedly, "she's gone, too."

"Yes," Kirk said, "that girl…"

His intercom buzzed. "Jim! Jim! Get down here to Sickbay! Right now! Jim, hurry!"

McCoy's voice had an urgency that was threaded with horror. In Sickbay the Enterprise's physician was trying to force himself to

look at his own handiwork. Within its life function chamber, he had encased Spock's motionless body with a transparent bubble device. There was a small wrapping about the upper part of the cranium. Frenziedly working at his adjustment levers, he said, "Now?"

Nurse Chapel, at her small panel, nodded. She threw a switch that set lights to blinking. "It's functioning," she said, her voice weak with relief.

"Thank God."

McCoy was leaning back against the table as Kirk burst through the door.

"Bones, what in the name of—" Kirk broke off. He had seen through the transparency of the bubble. "Spock!" He glanced swiftly at the life indicator. It showed a very low level. "Well?" he demanded harshly.

It was Nurse Chapel who answered him. "I found him lying on the table when I recovered consciousness."

"Like this?"

"No," McCoy said. "Not like this."

"Well, what happened?"

"I don't know!" McCoy shouted.

"You've got him under complete life support at total levels. Was he dead?"

McCoy raised himself by a hand pushed down on the table. "It starts there," he said.

"Damn you, Bones, talk!"

"He was worse than dead."

"What do you mean?"

"Jim—" McCoy spoke pleadingly as though he were appealing for mercy from his own sense of helplessness. "Jim—his brain is gone."

"Go ahead."

"Technically, the greatest job I ever saw. Every nerve ending of the brain neatly sealed. Nothing torn, nothing ripped. No bleeding. A surgical miracle."

"Spock's brain—" Kirk said, fighting for control.

"Gone." McCoy had given up on professional composure. His voice broke. "Spock—his incredible Vulcan physique survived until I could get the support system to take over. The body lives—but it has no mind."

"The girl," Kirk said.

"What girl?"

"She took it. I don't know where—or why. But she took Spock's brain."

"Jim…"

"How long can you keep the body functioning?"

"Several days at the most. And I can't guarantee that."

"That's not good enough, Bones."

"If it had happened to any of us, I could say indefinitely. But Vulcan physiology limits what I can do. Spock's body is much more dependent than ours on that tremendous brain of his for life support."

"I ask you—how long, Dr McCoy. I have to know."

Wearily, McCoy reached for the chart. "He suffered a loss of cerebral spinal fluid in the operation. Reserves are minimal. Spock's T-Negative blood supply—two total exchanges." He looked up from the chart. "Three days—no more."

Kirk moved over to the bubble. He could feel his heart cringe at the sight of the paper-white face inside it. Spock, the friend, the dear companion through a thousand hazards—Spock, the always reliable thinker, the reasonable one, the always reasonable and loyal one.

"All right, then—I've got three days."

At the naked anguish in his face, McCoy motioned the nurse to leave them alone.

"Jim, are you hoping to restore him his brain? How are you going to find it? Where are you going to look? Through the entire galaxy?"

"I'll find it."

"Even if you do find it, a brain can't be replaced with present surgical techniques."

"If it was taken, it can be put back. Obviously, there are techniques."

"I don't know them!" The cry was wrenched from McCoy.

"The thief who took it has the knowledge. I'll force it out of her! So help me, I'll get it out of her!"

It was Sulu who located the ion trail of the mystery ship.

"Look, Mr Scott. I've got it again!"

Scott was jotting numbers down on the board in his hand. "Aye, an ion trail. It's from that ship of hers all right."

"Where does it lead, Mr Chekov?" Kirk asked.

Chekov studied the panel at Spock's library computer. "It leads to system Sigma Draconis, sir."

"Lock on," Kirk said. "Maximum speed without losing the trail, Mr Sulu."

"Aye, Captain. Warp six."

"Mr Chekov, a complete readout on Sigma Draconis."

Sulu turned to Kirk. "Arrival, seven terrestrial hours, twenty-five minutes at warp six, sir."

"No mistake about the trail, Scotty?"

"No mistake, Captain."

Chekov called from Spock's station. "Coming into scanning range of the Sigma Draconis system, sir."

Alarm rang in Sulu's voice. "Captain, I've lost the trail!"

Kirk leaped from his chair. "You've lost the trail to Spock?"

"It's gone, sir. At warp six there was a sudden deactioned shift."

"No excuses, if you please," Kirk said. "All right, her trail is gone. But she was heading into this star system. She must be somewhere in it." He moved to Chekov. "Put a schematic of Sigma Draconis on the viewing screen."

The nine planets comprising the system took shape and position on the screen. "Readout, Mr Chekov," Kirk said.

"Sun, spectral type, G9. Three Class M planets showing sapient life. First planet rated number 5 on the industrial scale. Second Class M planet rated number 6."

"Earth equivalent, approximately 2030," Kirk estimated.

Scott broke in. "But that ship, Captain. Either it was thousands of years ahead of us—or the most incredible design fluke in history."

"Third Class M planet, Mr Chekov?"

"Aye, sir. No signs of industrial development. Rated number 2 on the industrial scale of 20. At last report in a glacial age. Sapient life plentiful but on a most primitive level." Chekov turned around to face Kirk. "Of course, sir, in none of these cases has a detailed Federation survey been made. All the information is the result of long-range scanning and preliminary contact reports. We don't know how accurate it is."

"Understood, Mr Chekov. There are three Class M planets, not one of which owns the capability of launching an interstellar flight. Yet one of them has obviously accomplished it."

Chekov, who had been punching up reports on the whirring computer, was too puzzled by the last one to note Kirk's irony. He compared it with what he saw on the screen before he said, "Captain, its odd. I'm picking up high-energy generation on Planet 7."

"That's the primitive glaciated one, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir,"

"Its source, Mr Chekov?"

"It could be natural—volcanic activity, steam, any of a dozen sources, sir. But the pulsations are very regular."

"Surface readings again?"

"No signs of organized civilization. Primitive humanoids in small groups. Apparently a routine hunter-predator stage of social development."

"With very regular pulsations of generated energy?"

"I can't explain it, Captain."

Kirk turned to address all members of the bridge crew. "This time," he said, "there is no time for mistakes. We've got to pick the right planet, go there—and get what we came for. Mr Chekov, your recommendation."

"Planet 3, sir. It's closest and the heaviest population."

Scott said, "With a technological rating of 5, it couldn't have put that ship we saw into space."

"None of these planets could," Chekov said.

"You've got to put your money where the odds are," Scott retorted. "Captain, my guess is Planet 4. Technologically it's ahead of 3."

"Yes," Kirk said. "But ion propulsion is beyond even our technology. Can you really credit theirs with its development?"

Uhura spoke up. "And what would they want with Mr Spock's brain?"

"What?" Kirk said.

"I said what would they want with Mr Spock's brain? What use could they make of it? Why should they want it?"

Kirk stared at her. "A very interesting question, Lieutenant. Why indeed should they want it? Planet 7. It's glaciated, you say, Mr Chekov?"

"Yes, sir. For several thousand years at least. Only the tropical zone is ice-free—and that would be bitterly cold. Humanoids exist on it; but only under very trying conditions."

"But the energy, Mr Chekov. It's there."

"Yes, sir. It doesn't make sense—but it's there."

Kirk sat back in his chair. Three days—and Spock's body would be a dead one. Choice. Choice again. Decision again—command decision. He made it.

"I'm taking a landing party down to Planet 7," he said.

Scott stirred uncomfortably.

"Well, Mr Scott?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Very well. We'll transport down immediately."

Kirk had seen some bleak landscapes in his time; but this one, he thought, would take the cake at any galactic fair.

What vegetation there was scarcely deserved the name, sparse as it was, brown, crackling under the feet with hardened frost. No green, just rocks, black under the sprinkling of snow that clung to their harsh crags, their crannies. A constant icy wind blew. He shivered, hoping that the rest of his party—McCoy, Scott, Chekov and two security guards—were as grateful as he was for their lightweight, thermal cold-weather clothing.

"Readings, Mr Scott." His warm breath congealed in a mist as he spoke.

"Scattered life forms, widely spaced. Humanoid all right. On the large side."

"Watch out for them. They are primitives. Readout, please, Mr Chekov."

Chekov unslung his tricorder, and went to work on the rocky plateau where they had materialized. His explorations acquired a witness. Above him was an escarpment, broken by a gulch, sheltered by an overhang of stunted scrub. A fur-clad figure, armed with a crude knobbed club, had scrambled through the gulch; and was lying now, belly flat, at the edge of the cliff to peer through the overhang at what went on below.

Chekov returned to his party. "No structures, Captain. No surface consumption of energy or generation of it. Atmosphere OK. Temperature—say a high maximum of forty. Livable."

"If you've got a thick skin," McCoy said.

The figure on the cliff had been joined by several other skin-clad creatures, their faces hidden by parkalike hoods. They moved, gathering, from rock to rock as though closing in. Most carried the heavy clubs. One bore a spear.

"Captain!" Chekov cried. "There's someone—something up there. There—up on that cliff…"

"Phasers on stun," Kirk ordered. "Fire only on my signal."

Chekov looked up again from his tricorder. "I register six of them, sir. Humanoids. Big."

"Remember, I want one of them conscious," Kirk said.

As he spoke, a huge man, savagely bearded, rose up on the cliff; and swinging his club in an arc over his head, hurled it downward. It struck a security guard a glancing blow. He yelled in surprise and alarm. The alarm in the yell brought the other five to their feet. They all clambered up to shower the *Enterprise* with rocks and clubs.

Aiming his phaser at one of them, Kirk fired. The man fell and rolled down the cliffs slope, stunned. Shouting to each other, the rest disappeared.

The prisoner belonged to a hardheaded lot. Consciousness returned to him with astonishing swiftness. He struggled to rise, but Scott seized him with a judo hold that suggested the reprisal of pain for struggle. The man (and he was a man) subsided. He looked up at Kirk, terror in his eyes. Extending his empty hands in a gesture of friendship, Kirk said, "We mean you no harm. We are not enemies. We want to be your friends."

The terror in the eyes abated slightly. Kirk spoke again. "We will not hurt you. We only want to talk to you. Let him go, Mr Scott."

"Captain, he could twist your head off."

"Let him go," Kirk repeated.

The man said, "You are not The Others?"

"No," Kirk said. "We are not The Others. We come from a far place."

"You are small like The Others. I could break you in two."

"But you won't," Kirk said. "We are men. Like you. Why did you attack us?"

"When The Others come, we fight. We thought you were The Others."

"Who are The Others?"

"They are the givers of pain and delight."

"Do they live here with you?"

"They come."

"Where do you see them when they come?"

The man spread his arms wide. "Everywhere. On the hunt, when we eat, at the time of sleep."

"The Others—where do they come from?"

Kirk got a heavy stare. "Do they come from the sky?" he asked.

"They are here. You will see. They will come for you. They come for all like us."

"Jim, ask him about women," McCoy said. He spoke to the man himself. "Do The Others come for your women, too?"

"Women?"

"The females of our kind," Kirk said.

The man shrugged. "Your words say nothing."

Kirk tried again. "We are looking for a—lost friend."

"If he is here, The Others have him."

"Will you take us where we can find The Others?"

"No one wants to find The Others."

"We do. Take us to them and we will let you go."

"Captain!" Chekov, his tricorder switched to full power, was pointing excitedly to the ground. "Right where we're standing, there's a foundation below the surface! And masonry debris! There are registrations all over the place!"

"Buildings?"

"Unquestionably, sir. Immensely old and completely buried. I don't know how our sensors misread them."

"Then somewhere below us is where The Others live," Kirk said. "Mr Scott, check it out."

Scott and a guard were moving away when a hoarse cry came from the fur-clad man. "Don't go!" he screamed. "Don't go!"

Chekov and McCoy tried to calm him. He refused calm. He pulled madly out of their hold, shrieking with terror. "Release him," Kirk said. They obeyed.

"Don't go!" The last warning was almost a sob. Then he was gone, frantically hauling himself back up the cliff. Chekov said, "What have these Others done to cause such fear?"

"We may know soon enough," was McCoy's sober reply.

"Bones, what was it he said The Others give? It was 'pain and delight,' wasn't it?"

"A peculiar mixture, Jim."

"Everything's peculiar," Kirk said. "A dead and buried city on a planet in the glacial age…"

"And a man," said Chekov, "who doesn't know the meaning of the word 'women.' "

"There's a thread somewhere that ties it all together," Kirk said thoughtfully. "Right now I wish I had Spock here to find it for me. No offense, Mr Chekov."

Chekov said fervently, "I wish it, too, sir."

"It's beginning to look as though your hunch was right, Jim. If there was a city here, maybe millions of years ago…"

Kirk nodded. "Then it could have developed a science capable of building that ship we saw."

"Captain, over here, sir." Scott and a security guard were standing near a spur of rock jutting out from the cliff. Under it was an opening, large enough to make entrance accessible to even one of the huge, shaggy, fur-clad men. It led into a cave. Or a room. Or something else. "I've looked inside," Scott said. "There's food in there, Captain."

"Food?"

"And a whole pile of other stuff. Some kind of cache. You'd better look, sir."

The place was about twelve feet square. It should have been dark. It wasn't. It was quite light enough to see the food, mounds of it, laid out neatly along one wall. Furs were stacked against another along with clubs, metal knives, tools, hatchets. "A storehouse," McCoy said, "for our muscular friends."

"I don't think so, Bones."

Kirk picked up a crude metal ax. "Forged," he said, "tempered. Our savage brothers did not make this." He returned to the cave's entrance to run his fingers along its edges. They were smooth. He came slowly back to examine the place more closely. Then he saw it—a light which alternately glowed and faded. It came from a small cell set into the wall behind the piled food. He waited. The light went into glow—and shot a beam across the food to a cell in the opposite wall.

"Scotty, Bones," he called. As they approached him, he barred their forward movement with an arm. The light glowed—and he gestured toward the beam. "What do you think?"

"It could be a warning device to keep those beast boys away from the food," Scott said.

"You think that beam could kill?" McCoy asked him.

"It very well might."

"How about this?" Kirk looked thoughtful. "The food is a lure to bring those primitive men into this place."

"In that case, Captain, the beam might be serving as a signal of their arrival."

"And this cave," Kirk said, "could be a trap."

"It could trap us, too, then, Captain," Chekov said nervously.

"Yes," Kirk said. "So you and the security team will remain at the entrance. We will maintain contact with you. If you don't hear from us within five hours, you will return to the *Enterprise* and contact Starfleet Command. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then return to the entrance."

"Yes, sir."

At Kirk's nod, Scott and McCoy checked their communicators. McCoy slung his tricorder over his shoulder. Then all three stepped over the beam. Kirk turned. Behind them metal doors had dropped over the cave's entrance.

"Phasers on stun," he said.

A loud hum broke the silence. Its pitch increased to a whine—and the whole cave moved bodily under their feet, descending as a descending elevator descends. It continued its smooth downward plunge; and Scott, checking his tricorder, said, "Captain, that power we picked up before—we're getting closer to it."

"A lot of power?" Kirk asked.

"Enough to push this planet out of orbit."

The whining noise was diminishing. "Natural or artificial, Mr Scott?"

"Artificial, I'd say, sir."

"And the source?"

"Either a nuclear pile a hundred miles wide or…"

"Or what, Mr Scott?"

"Ion power."

Kirk smiled thinly. Ion power—it had stolen Spock. He had to fight against an uprush of rage. Then he decided to let it happen to him. He'd use it to sharpen every sense he had. He succeeded.

The door of the cave-elevator had been fitted so deftly into it that he alone spotted it before it slid silently open. A young girl was facing them. Kirk's eyes looked for and found the button-studded bracelet on her arm. Her face had tightened in surprise and fear. But before she could stab at her bracelet, Kirk fired his phaser. She fell.

Scott stood guard while Kirk removed the bracelet. "Is she all right, Bones?" he asked as McCoy rose from her stunned body.

"I'll have her talking in a minute—if she talks."

The pretty eyelids opened. At once her right hand went to her left arm. Kirk dangled the bracelet in her face. "We've had enough of that trick," he said.

She was instantly on her feet to make a grab for the bracelet. As McCoy's firm hold convinced her of her helplessness, she said, "You do not belong here. You are not morg."

Kirk ignored that. "Take us to the one in charge," he said. "We must talk to him."

"Him? What is him?" said the girl. "I am Luma and I know no him."

"Who is in charge here?" Kirk's patience was slipping. "Where is the brain? Where was it taken? Do you understand me?"

"You do not belong here. You are not morg *or* eymorg. I know nothing about a brain."

"I'll say you don't!" Kirk said. "I have no time for stupid lies!"

"Jim—she's not lying. I've checked her. She really doesn't know." McCoy reslung his tricorder over his shoulder; and the girl seized her moment to make a wild dash for a door at the end of the corridor. Kirk caught her just as she reached it, but she had managed to press a photo cell built into the door jamb. Spinning her around, he barred her way through it.

"What is this place?" he demanded.

"This place is here."

"Who are you?"

"I say before I am Luma. I am eymorg. You are not eymorg. You are not morg. What you are I do not understand."

"Well," Kirk said, "they certainly seem to be in bad need of brains around here. Watch her, Scotty."

"You'll get nothing out of that one, Captain. She's got the mind of a child."

"Then she's got a sister who isn't retarded!" Kirk said. "One that she can take us to! I've had all I'm taking of these pleas of

ignorance!”

He flipped the dial on his communicator. “Captain Kirk to Chekov —Kirk to Chekov. Come in, Mr Chekov!”

There was no response. He altered the dial adjustment and tried again. “Kirk to Chekov. Come in, Mr Chekov…”

“Fascinating. Activity without end. But with no volition—fascinating.”

Kirk froze. A chill shook him from head to feet. It was Spock’s voice, familiar, loved, speaking very slowly.

“Fascinat—” Kirk shouted into the communicator. “Spock! Spock! Is that you?”

“Captain? Captain Kirk?”

“Yes, Spock! Yes!”

“It’s good to hear a voice, especially yours.”

Wordless, his hands shaking, Kirk handed his communicator to McCoy. Joy in his voice, McCoy cried, “Where are you, Spock? We’re coming to get you!”

“Is that you, Dr McCoy? Are you with the Captain?”

“Where else would I be?” In his turn McCoy silently passed the communicator to Scott.

“Where are you, Mr Spock?”

“Engineer Scott, too? Unfortunately, I do not know where I am.”

Kirk grabbed the communicator. “We’ll get to you, Spock. It won’t be long. Hold on.”

“Good. Captain. It seems most unlikely that I will be able to get to you.”

McCoy spoke again. “If you don’t know where you are, do you know what they’re doing with you? That could help us.”

“Sorry, Doctor. I have not been able to achieve any insight into that.”

“They are using you for something,” insisted McCoy.

“Perhaps you are right. At the moment I do not feel useful. Functional in some ways—but not useful.”

“Spock,” Kirk said, “keep concentrating. The use they are making of you will determine where they have you. Keep concentrating on the use they are making of you—and we’ll get to you.”

The door beside them slid open. Two of the shaggy men came through it. Metal bands encircled their brows. They were welded into other bands that passed over their heads and down to cup

their chins. Behind them stood the beautiful passenger of the ion-propelled spaceship.

She motioned the men toward Kirk, McCoy and Scott. They didn't move. She pushed a red stud on her bracelet. The banded men writhed in torment. In a paroxysm of mixed pain and frustrated fury, they charged the *Enterprise* party. McCoy, caught off guard, felt a rib crack under the pressure of two massively muscular arms. Kirk had pulled free of his attacker's grip. He bent his back under the next maddened assault and his man slid over it into a somersault. He found his phaser, fired it—and the morg, the man, lay still. Then he felled Scott's adversary with a karate blow.

This time the beautiful lady chose to depress a yellow button on her bracelet. Kirk's phaser dropped from his hand as unconsciousness flooded over him. Like the two morgs, like Scott and McCoy, he lay still.

The five male bodies, helplessly stretched at her feet, pleased the lady. When the girl Luma joined her, the spectacle pleased her, too.

It was a woman's world under the planet's surface.

In its Council Chamber, women, all physically attractive, sat at a T-shaped table. As the still triumphantly smiling lady took her place at its head, they rose, bowed and caroled, "Honor to Kara the Leader!" Beside each woman knelt a man, sleek, well fed, docile as a eunuch. Occasionally a woman stroked a man as one pats a well-housebroken pet.

At Kara's signal a door opened. Two of the muscular kitten-men pushed Kirk, McCoy and Scott into the room and up to the head of the table. The metal bands had now been fixed to their heads. Their masculinity caused a stir among the women; but it was the response, not of adult women, but of children on their first visit to a zoo.

Scott was the first to recognize Kara. "She's the one who came to the *Enterprise*" he whispered to Kirk.

Kirk nodded. "It's the smile I remember," he said.

She spoke. "You have a thing to say?" she asked pleasantly.

"Just one thing," Kirk said. "What have you done with the brain of my First Officer?"

"We do not know your First Officer."

"His brain," Kirk said. "You have Spock's brain."

Something registered in what passed for Kara's brain. "Ah, yes! Brain! you spoke to Luma also of brain. We do not understand."

They are retardates, Kirk thought. Getting through to whatever gray matter existed in that beautiful head was going to be tough. Temper, temper! he said to himself. Speaking slowly, very distinctly, "You were on my Starship," he said. "You were there to take Spock's brain. What's more, you took it. So what's this talk of not understanding what I mean by brain?"

"We do not know these things you speak of. We are only here below and here above. This is our place. You are not a morg. You are stranger."

Kirk's temper refused to heed his exhortation. "You came to my ship…"

McCoy put a restraining hand on his arm. "Jim, she may not remember. Or even really know. Dissociation may be complete. One thing is sure. She never performed that operation."

"If it required intelligence, she certainly didn't," Kirk said.

Kara pointed to Luma. "You hurt her. It is not permitted again to hurt anyone."

"We are sorry," Kirk said. "We did not wish to hurt."

"You wish to return to your home? You may go."

Kirk rallied all the charm he'd occasionally been accused of possessing. "We wish to stay here with you. We wish to learn from you. And tell you about us. Then we will not be stranger."

The women were delighted. They smiled and nodded at each other. McCoy decided to toss his charm into the pot. "Above," he said, "it is cold, harsh. Below here with you, it is warm. Perhaps it is your beauty that freshens the air."

They liked that, too. They liked it so much that Scott was encouraged to say, "There is no sun. Yet there is light—the light of your loveliness."

Kirk had lost his last shred of patience. "I want to meet those in charge," he said.

"In charge?" echoed Kara.

She looked so puzzled that he added, "The leader of your people."

"Leader? I am Leader. There is no other."

Dumbfounded, Scott said, "Who runs your machines?"

Kirk drew a deep breath. "This is a complex place," he said. "Who controls it?"

"Control?" she said. "Controller?"

The shocked look on her face told him the word had meaning for her. He tried to subdue his rising excitement. "Controller! Yes! That is right. We would like to meet—to see your controller!"

Kara's fury was as abrupt as it was intense. "It is not permitted! Never! Controller is apart, alone! We serve Controller! No other is permitted near!"

"We intend no harm," Kirk said hastily.

But he had exploded a volcano. "You have come to destroy us!" Kara screamed. The women around her, infected by her panic, twittered like birds at the approach of a snake. They all rose, their fingers reaching for their bracelets. Appalled, Kirk cried, "No! No! We do not come to destroy you! We are not destroyers!" McCoy came to stand beside him. He put all the reassurance at his disposal into his voice. "All we want," he said, "is to talk to somebody about Spock's brain."

"Brain! And again, brain! What is brain? It is Controller, is it not?"

McCoy said, "Well, yes. In a way it is. The human brain controls the individual's functions." He was beginning to suspect the significance of the hysteria. He looked at Kirk. "And the controlling power of the Vulcan brain, Jim, is extraordinarily powerful."

Scott, too, had realized that Kara identified the word "brain" with controlling power. "Is it possible they are using Spock's brain to—" He didn't complete the sentence.

"The fact that it is a Vulcan brain makes it possible," McCoy said.

Kirk suddenly flung himself to his knees. "Great Leader! We have come from a far place to learn from your Controller…"

"You lie! You have come to take the Controller! You have said this!"

Still on his knees, Kirk said, "He is our friend. We beg you to take us to him."

But the fright in the women's faces had increased. One began to sob. Kara stood up. "Quiet! There is no need to fear. We know they can be prevented." The women refused consolation. As though the very sight of the *Enterprise* men filled them with horror, they pushed their benches back and fled the Council Chamber.

Kirk made a leap for Kara. "You must take us to him!" he shouted.

She touched the red stud on her bracelet. The bands cupping their heads were suddenly clawed with fiery spindles. They stabbed their temples with an excruciating agony that obliterated thought, the memory of Spock, of the *Enterprise*, the world itself. The torture widened, spread to their throats, their chests, devouring their breath. Choking, Kirk tore at the band and collapsed. Beside him, McCoy and Scott had lost consciousness.

"I must learn what to do!" Kara cried. "Keep them here!"

Her two servant morgs hesitated. She moved a finger toward her bracelet. The gesture was sufficient. They lumbered over to the slumped bodies to take up guard positions on either side of them.

The pain had ceased. Kirk opened his eyes to see McCoy stir feebly. "Are you all right, Bones?" McCoy nodded, his eyes bloodshot. "I—I wouldn't have believed the human body could have survived such pain," he whispered. Revived, Scott was pulling at his headband. "They're attached to us by a magnetic lock of some kind."

"No wonder the morgs are so obedient," Kirk said. He struggled back to his feet. "What beats me is how this place is kept functioning. What keeps the air pure and the temperature equable?"

"It's clearly not the men," McCoy said. "They live on the frozen surface like beasts. So it must be the women. They live down here with all the comforts of an advanced society."

"Not one of those women could have set up the complex that keeps the place going," Scott said. "That would call on engineering genius. There is no sign of genius in these females."

"They're smart enough to have evolved these headbands," Kirk said. "What a way to maintain control over men!"

" 'Pain and delight,' " McCoy quoted. "I'm sure you've noticed the delight aspect in these surroundings, Jim."

"Yes. Beauty, sex, warmth, food—and all of them under the command of the women."

"And how does Spock's brain fit into this woman-commanded underground?" Scott asked.

Kirk didn't answer. The guard morgs had left them to go and stand at a corner table. On it, neatly arranged, were their tricorders and communicators. Only their phasers were missing. "Bones," Kirk said, "do you see what I see over there?"

"The equipment is only there, Jim, because the women don't understand its use."

"Gentlemen," Kirk said, "wouldn't you say that science holds the answer to the problem of recovering our equipment?"

"Aye," Scott said. "Let's go, Captain!"

They went for the morgs. Kirk gripped the jaw of one in a hard press. There was a bellow of pain. Terrified that it had been heard, the other morg looked apprehensively toward the door. Then he made a jump for Scott. Both guards were paragons of muscular strength; but their long training in docility had destroyed their ability to use it effectively. Kirk downed his Goliath with a jab to the throat. Scott's rabbit punch disposed of the other rabbit. Scientific fighting indeed held the answer to their problem. Within forty seconds the two guards were out for the count.

Kirk hastily adjusted the high-power dial on his communicator. "Spock! Spock! This channel reached you. Come in, Spock! Kirk here."

"Yes, Captain." It was Spock's voice. "I am also here. But I begin to feel extended almost to infinity. Have you returned to the *Enterprise*?"

"No! We were just temporarily out of—communication."

"You have not been seriously injured, I trust?"

"No! Spock, have you discovered what use you are being put to? Is it medical or…"

"I am not sure, sir. I seem to have a body that stretches into endlessness."

"Body?" Scott blurted. "You have no body!"

"No body? But then what am I?"

"You are a disembodied brain," McCoy said.

"Really? Fascinating. That could explain much. My medulla oblongata is apparently directing my breathing, pumping my blood and maintaining a normal physiological temperature."

"Spock," McCoy said, "keeping a detached brain alive is a medical miracle. But keeping it functioning, that's impossible."

"I would agree with you, Doctor, if it were not the present fact. It seems incontrovertible that my brain is functioning, does it not?"

"It does, Spock, I must admit. And gladly, for once."

"How was the operation accomplished?"

"We don't know."

"Then why are you endangering your lives by coming here?"

"We've come to take you back," Kirk said.

"Back where? To my body?"

"Yes, Spock."

"Thoughtful, Captain. But probably impractical. My body…"

McCoy took the communicator. "Don't you think I had the sense to slap it into our life support chamber?"

"Of course. But I do not believe you own the skill or knowledge to replace a brain, Doctor. That skill does not yet exist in the galaxy."

Kirk removed the communicator from McCoy. "The skill that removed the brain exists right here. The skill to replace it may exist here, too."

"Captain, how much time has elapsed since my brain was removed?"

"Forty-eight hours."

"Sir, Dr McCoy must have told you that seventy-two hours is the maximum my body can be…"

"I know, Spock. That leaves us fourteen hours."

"It seems all too brief a time to develop the required skill, Captain."

"Very brief. One question, Spock. Pain causing bands have been fixed to our heads. Do you know how to get us free of them? They have to come off."

"I shall consider it, sir," the voice said.

"Give it top priority. And stay with us, Spock. Kirk out."

They moved cautiously out of the Council Chamber into the corridor. It was empty. Kirk spoke soberly. "As the lady said, gentlemen, we are not morg. We are disciplined men, intelligent, committed to a purpose. We will remain committed to it in spite of any pain inflicted upon us."

His communicator crackled. "I have the answer for you, Captain. Your pain bands are manually controlled. A blue button on a bracelet releases them. That doesn't make much sense but…"

"Oh yes, it does," Kirk said. "Thank you, Spock."

A blue button. He must remember. They were extremely color-prone in this place. The ornamented door at the end of the corridor blazed with color like a stained-glass window. It seemed to possess other qualities. Though they were approaching it slowly, McCoy's tricorder had begun to buzz loudly. With every careful step they took, the volume increased in intensity until McCoy said, "I'm tuning out. The power is too great for the tricorder."

“Spock,” Kirk said into his communicator, “do you know whether you are close to the power source?”

“I can’t tell that. But you, Captain, are very close to it.”

It was a credible statement. Near now to the elaborate door, they could see that its colored bosses were radiating a dazzling luminescence. They pushed it open to be faced by a wall banked with shining instrumentation. The room might have been the laboratory of magicians versed in the mysteries of some arcane technology. Another wall was a gigantic control board, topped by a helmetlike device. Near it a large black box set on a metallic pedestal was massed with photoelectric cells, all adjusted to correspond to similar cells on the control board. They flashed together in a constant interchange of energy.

Kara, her body taut, was standing before the black box, her back to them.

She heard them, despite their care. She whirled, her hand instantly touching her bracelet. The agony seared them, ripping a scream from Scott. They stumbled on, their legs rubber, their chests on fire. Kirk reached her, tore her hand from her bracelet and wrenched it off her arm. The blue button. He pressed it—and then: headbands snapped. Kara gave a wild cry.

It echoed and reechoed endlessly. Then they saw what stretched beyond the room—a vast machinery that extended for hundreds of underground miles, utterly alien, gleaming, no element in its panels and coils familiar. Awed into silence, Scott finally found his voice. “Captain, it is the ultimate. I think that is an air recirculation unit—but I’m not sure. I’m not even sure this is a hydroponic regulator. It all seems to have been contrived for life support—but it’s a work of genius that is beyond me.”

Kirk had his eyes on the black box. It glittered under the light rays that streamed to it from all sections of the great control board. How he knew what he knew he didn’t know. He walked up to it. “Spock,” he said, “you are in a black box tied with light rays to a complex control panel.”

The voice sounded very close. “Incredible!” it said.

“Spock, you said you were breathing, pumping blood, maintaining temperature. Are you also recirculating air, running heating systems, purifying water?”

“Indeed, Captain, that is exactly what I’m doing.”

Kara had broken free of McCoy’s grip. Frenzied, she rushed at Kirk, trying to push him away from the box. He seized her; and she sagged, screaming, “We will die! You must not take the

Controller! We will die! The Controller is young, powerful—perfect!"

"Extremely flattering," said the black box.

She flung herself to the floor, groping for Kirk's knees. "Leave him with us! He will give life to us for ten thousand years!"

"You will find another Controller," Kirk said.

She was sobbing. "There exists no other in the world. The old one is finished. Our new one must stay with us!"

Spock's voice spoke. "Captain, there seem to be rather complex problems. My brain is maintaining life for a large population. Remove it—and the life support systems it supports come to a stop."

McCoy looked somber. "Jim, here his brain is alive. If you remove it from the connections that are feeding it now to turn it over to me, it may die."

"That is the risk," Spock said. "Captain, much as I long for reunion with you and the *Enterprise*, the prospect of betraying such a dependent society is disturbing to a conscience like mine."

"Rubbish!" said Kirk. "Pure rationalization. It's always provoked by a weeping woman. She took your brain out—and she can put it back!" He shook Kara roughly. "How did you remove the brain?"

"I do not know."

"She couldn't know, Jim. Her mental faculties are almost atrophied. The Controller has done all her thinking for her."

"She took it out!" Kirk shouted. He shook Kara again. "*How did you do it?*"

"It was—the old knowledge," she whimpered.

"How did you get the knowledge?"

"I put—the teacher on my head."

"What teacher?"

She pointed to the helmetlike device. "What did you do with it?" Kirk demanded. "Show us!"

She shrieked in horror. "It is forbidden! The ancients forbade it. Only on the command of the ancients can I know."

"Show us," Kirk said.

Hysterical tears swelling her face, Kara got to her feet, went to the control board and reached for the helmet. Lifting it reverently down, she slowly lowered it over her head. Over the sobs that convulsed her, Spock's voice said, "If I may explain, Captain. She referred to the taped storehouse of knowledge accumulated by the

builders of this place. It is a most impressive store. I scan it. The tapes are circuited to lead into the helmet. When placed over the head of the priestess leader, their information penetrates her mind. It is used rarely—and only when predetermined by the builders."

It was another credible statement. Under the helmet, Kara's face had changed. It had been wiped clean of her infantile hysteria. Into her eyes had come a searching look, the alertness of active thinking. Even her voice had taken on the vibrancy of intelligence. She spoke with clipped clarity. "That explanation is essentially correct. However, the Controller gives no credit to me, I deserve it. I provide the means by which the knowledge is used. Without me, Captain of the *Enterprise*…"

This Kara was a woman to take into account. McCoy acknowledged the difference. "That is true. Without you the miracle that has kept Spock's brain alive could not have occurred."

She bowed with dignity. "Thank you, Doctor."

Kirk said, "We all appreciate your contribution."

"Good," she said. "Then you will also appreciate your own contribution—*this*…"

A phaser was in her hand.

"Captain!" Scott cried. "It's on the kill mark!"

"So it is," she said. "And that is the knowledge you have given to me—how to kill!"

Kirk was the first to rally. "You knew how to kill before we came. You are killing Spock by keeping his brain."

She laughed. "The Controller die? He will live ten thousand years!"

"But Spock will be dead. Even now his body is dying. Soon it will be too late to restore him life."

"No. Only the vessel that once contained the Controller will be dead."

"But the body and the brain comprise a being," Kirk said.

The phaser didn't waver in its aim. Above it, her eyes were very bright. "Spare me such opinions. You will stay here quietly with me until the vessel is dead. Then we shall say goodbye and you can return to your ship."

"Your ancients are using you to murder," Kirk said.

She smiled. "Their commandment is being obeyed."

"Commandments older than your ancients' forbid murder," Kirk said.

She was shaken by the cold intensity of his voice. “Why do you not understand? My people need their Controller more then you need your friend.”

A sense of the righteousness of his wrath swept over Kirk like a great wave. For the first time in his life he understood the meaning of “towering” rage. It seemed to lift him up to a great height. He extended a finger at her. “No one may take the life of another. Not for any purpose. It is not allowed.”

He stepped forward. The phaser lifted. Then it drooped. Behind her, Scott quietly reached an arm over her shoulder—and took the phaser. Her eyes filled with silent tears.

“The commandment,” she whispered, “should be fulfilled.”

“You will help us,” Kirk said. “How long does the knowledge last?”

“Three kyras,” she said.

“You will restore what you stole,” Kirk said.

“And betray my people? No.”

“Jim—if the helmet worked for her, it might work for me.” McCoy moved to Kara, lifted the helmet from her head—and Spock’s voice spoke. “The configurations of her brain are alien, Doctor. It could burn your brain right out.”

“I am a surgeon. If I can learn these techniques, I might retain them.”

“Bones, how long can we keep the brain functioning once we remove it from its current environment?”

“Five or six hours.”

“When it’s tied to our life support system, will it give us any more time?”

“A few more hours.”

Spock’s voice said, “I cannot allow such risk to the Doctor.”

McCoy handed the helmet to Kirk. He went to the box. “Spock, Spock, didn’t you hear me? I may retain the memory of these techniques to pass on to the world! Isn’t that worth the risk to me? You would take such a risk! Would you deny the same right to me?”

Kirk said, “Take the helmet, Bones. Put it on.”

Slowly McCoy lowered the device over his head. From the black box words came. “Mr Scott, go to the left lower quarter of the control board…”

“Yes, sir.

"Have you located a small lever in that sector?"

"Yes, Mr Spock."

"Depress it exactly two notches and force it sharply into the slit on the right."

A low humming sounded. As power moved from the control board into the helmet's circuitry, McCoy's hand went to his throat. His body and his face seemed to disconnect. His face glowed as though he'd been struck with some final illumination, but his body convulsed in torture. Then he blacked out and keeled over. Scott hastily pulled the lever back into its original position, then he and Kirk rushed to McCoy and gently lifted the helmet from his head. Kirk sat down, holding the unconscious body—and McCoy's eyes opened.

The vagueness in them disappeared. They began to brighten, first in wonder, then in exaltation. He gave a great shout of pure joy. "Of course—of course—a child could do it. A little child could do it!"

"Good luck to you, Dr McCoy," said the black box.

In the Enterprise's Sickbay, the operating room had been prepared.

Spock lay on its sheet-shrouded table, a shield screening the upper section of his head. Behind the shield, Nurse Chapel, a look of amazement on her face, was concentrated on every move made by the surgical instruments in McCoy's rubber-gloved hands. He was working with an authority she'd never seen before in a human surgeon. She took the time to wish that Kirk and Scott could see what she was privileged to see. But they, with Kara, had been placed behind a grille.

She went to the grille to whisper to Kirk. "Captain, don't worry. It's not to be believed—the way he's fusing ganglia, nerve endings, even individual nerves almost too small to see—and as if he'd been doing it all his life."

"How much longer?" Kirk said.

"I can't tell, sir. He's going so much faster than is humanly possible."

"Time is important," he said. "There's no way of knowing how long we can count on this increased surgical knowledge to last."

Kara suddenly sobbed. Kirk placed an arm about her shoulder. "What is it?" he said.

"You will have him back. But we are destroyed."

He led her out into the corridor. "No," he said, "you are not destroyed. You'll have no Controller and that will be fine. You will have to come up from below and live on the surface."

"We will die in the cold."

"No, you won't. We will help you until you can help yourselves. You will build houses. You'll learn to keep warm by working to keep warm. You'll learn how to be women instead of hothouse plants."

"Captain Kirk!"

Nurse Chapel was at the Sickbay door. "You'd better come quickly, sir!"

McCoy had stopped working. He had backed away from the operating table. He looked sick. "I—can't I—I can't…"

"He's forgetting, Captain," said Nurse Chapel.

"Bones!" Kirk called through the grille.

McCoy stumbled toward him. "All the ganglia—the nerves—a million of them—what am I supposed to do with them? The thalamus—the pallium…"

"Bones! You can't stop now!"

Nurse Chapel, her eyes on the life support indicator, said, "Doctor—the cerebral spinal fluid is almost exhausted."

McCoy groaned. "But—I don't know what to do. It's gone—I don't remember—no one can replace a brain!"

"But you could, Bones! It was child's play just a short while ago!"

"It's all gone, Jim. He's going to die—and I can't stop it!"

"Dr McCoy."

Half-strangled, choked, it was nevertheless Spock's voice. They stared at the body on the sheeted table. McCoy was astounded into asking, "Spock, did you speak? How did you speak?"

"If you will finish connecting my vocal cords, I may be able to help."

McCoy rushed behind the shield. He chose an instrument. Then he discarded it, picked up another one and gave a brisk order to Nurse Chapel. Spock suddenly coughed. The voice came a little stronger. "Good, One thing at a time. Now, Doctor, try the sonic separator. No discouragement…"

"No, Spock—it's been like trying to thread a needle with a sledgehammer."

"No discouragement," Spock repeated. "I already have feeling, sensation. Now stimulate the nerve endings and observe the reactions. I shall tell you when the probe is correct. When I tell you, seal the endings with the trilaser connector."

Kirk spoke to McCoy. "Well?"

His answer came in a slight hum from behind the shield. Through the grille, he could see Spock's arms move, moving normally, up and down, bending normally at the elbow.

"Very good," Spock said. "Now, Doctor, please move to reconnect the major blood vessels. Begin with the carotid artery."

His face drawn with strain, McCoy glanced over at Kirk. "Even if this works," he said, "I'll never live it down—this confounded Vulcan telling me how to operate!"

Relief swamped Kirk. They were back at the old bickering. McCoy had paused to allow Nurse Chapel to wipe the sweat from his forehead. He returned to work and Spock said, "They are sealed, Doctor."

"Are they, Bones?"

McCoy raised his head. "How do I know? He knows. I've probably made a thousand mistakes—sealing individual nerve endings, joining ganglia. The fluid balance is right but—I don't know."

Nurse Chapel was wiping his forehead again when Spock's eyelids flickered. The eyes opened. Spock lifted his head and his eyebrows went up into the arch McCoy thought never to see again. He shouted, "Jim!"

Kirk strode behind the shield. Spock was sitting up. "Gentlemen," he said, "it is a pleasure to see you again."

"Spock—Spock," Kirk said—and swallowed. "How do you feel?"

"On the whole, I believe I am quite fit, sir."

He started to get off the table. "For the Lord's sake, take it easy!" Kirk yelled.

Spock winced under a twinge of pain. "Perhaps you are right, Captain. I seem to have something of a headache. Perhaps I had better close my eyes."

"You are going to sleep and sleep and sleep," Kirk said.

Spock sleepily closed his eyes and immediately opened them in obvious surprise. "The eyelids work," he said. "Fascinating! It

would seem, Doctor, that few of your connections were made in error."

"I performed a miracle of surgery on you to get you back into one piece," McCoy said.

"Doctor, I regret that I was unable to provide you with a blueprint."

McCoy turned to Kirk. "What I'll never know is why I reconnected his mouth to his brain."

Scott came out of the bridge elevator.

"Our technical aid teams have been beamed down to Planet 7, Captain."

"First reports, Mr Scott?"

Scott rubbed his chin. "Well, sir, restoring friendly relations between its males and females won't be easy. Neither sex trusts the other one."

"How very human," commented Spock.

"And very cold," McCoy put in. "Especially the women. However, the aid parties have provided the ladies with a tool for procuring food, furs and fuel from the men."

"Oh?" Kirk turned from one to the other. "Money?"

"No, sir," Scott said. "Perfume."

"I'm not given to predictions, gentlemen, but I'll venture one now," Kirk told them. "The sexual conflict on Planet 7 will be a short one."

"I fail to see what facts you base your prediction on, Captain," Spock said.

"On long, cold winter nights, Mr Spock—on the fact that cuddling is so much warmer than wood fires."

"Cuddling, sir?"

"A human predilection, Spock," McCoy said. "We don't expect you to know about it."

"Of course not, Doctor. It is a well-known fact that we Vulcans propagate our race by mail." He grinned.

"Spock!" McCoy shouted. "You smiled! No, by George, you positively grinned!"

"Another tribute to your surgery, Doctor. I was endeavoring to sneeze."

"Well, of all the ungrateful patients I—" McCoy began indignantly. It was with a real effort that Kirk maintained the gravity that seemed appropriate to the old, familiar, comfortable

occasion. And sure enough, Spock nodded politely to the outraged McCoy and returned to his station.

In the end, Kirk couldn't maintain it. He laughed—a laugh of delighted affection. To the smiling Sulu beside him, he said, "We're through here, Mr Sulu. Warp factor three."

IS THERE IN TRUTH NO BEAUTY?

(Jean Lisette Aroeste)

The civilian named Lawrence Marvick stepped from the Transporter platform of the *Enterprise*, aggression in every line of his square-jawed face. Kirk, moving forward to greet him, thought, *What's the man afraid of?* But his voice was smoothly cordial. "Welcome aboard, Mr Marvick. I am James Kirk, the Cap—"

Marvick cut him off. "Kirk, what are you doing here? You'll have to leave, you know, before the Medeusan Ambassador arrives!"

"I am aware of that, Mr Marvick. We have taken all precautions. This is Mr Spock, our First Officer."

Marvick eyed Spock briefly. "Oh yes, you're the Vulcan. It's all right for you to remain here but you, Kirk, and that other officer…"

Scott came from the Transporter console to shake the guest's hand with enthusiasm. "Montgomery Scott, Chief Engineer, Mr Marvick. Call me Scotty!"

Recovering his hand, the new arrival addressed Spock. "Have you got your vizor? You must have it. Humans who get even a glimpse of Medeusans have gone insane."

Spock bowed. "Thank you, Mr Marvick. I shall be wearing the vizor."

Marvick's authoritative manner was beginning to rile Kirk. "We mustn't keep the Ambassador waiting," he said. "Mr Marvick, will you go with Mr Scott now, please? You two should have a good deal in common."

As Scott ushered the man out, Kirk heard him say, "It's a rare privilege to meet one of the designers of the *Enterprise*. I appreci —"

The door closed and Kirk crossed to the intercom. "Lieutenant Uhura, inform the Ambassador and Dr Jones that we're ready to beam them aboard." He turned to see Spock removing a red safety vizor from his belt. "You're sure that thing will work?"

"It has proved entirely effective for Vulcans, sir."

"It's your human half I'm worried about. Report to me when the Transport has been completed."

"Yes, Captain."

Left alone as the Captain returned to the bridge, Spock adjusted the vizor. It covered not only his eyes but the whole upper half of his face. At the Transporter console, he manipulated the beam-up buttons. On the platform, sparkles gradually assumed the slim shape of a young woman. The sheen of embroidery on her long, graceful gown matched her cloud of silver-blond hair. Beside her was a box of medium size. Removing her red vizor, she revealed black-lashed eyes of a vivid blue. Then, to Spock's astonishment, a white arm was lifted in the Vulcan salute.

An eyebrow slightly raised, Spock returned it. "Welcome aboard, Ambassador Kollos," he said. "I am First Officer Spock."

She stepped from the platform. "And I am Dr Jones—Dr Miranda Jones." She gestured to the box still on the platform. "The Ambassador is honored to meet you."

Quiet and undisconcerted, Spock went to the box, affixing anti-gravs to it. When they were firmly clamped into place, he made his report to Kirk. "Ready to proceed, Captain."

Kirk, on the bridge, swung to Uhura. "Lieutenant, open channels to all decks."

"All channels open, sir."

Kirk reached for his speaker. "This is the Captain. All ship's personnel, clearance plans now in effect. Vacate corridors immediately. The Ambassador will be escorted at once to his quarters." He moved an intercom button. "Mr Spock, all decks are now clear. You may proceed."

The box was clearly the habitat of the Medeusan Ambassador. As Spock lifted it carefully out of an elevator, he said, "Dr Jones, may I offer you my congratulations on your assignment with Ambassador Kollos?"

She bowed. "The assignment is not yet definite. It will depend upon my ability to achieve a true mind-link with the Ambassador."

"You should find it a fascinating experience."

A flicker of resentment flashed in her blue eyes. "I wasn't aware that *anyone* had ever succeeded in a mind-link with a Medeusan!"

"Nobody has," Spock said. "I was merely referring to mind-links I have attempted with other species."

"Surely," she said, "your duties as a Starship officer do not permit you the luxury of many such experiments!"

He regarded her gravely. "My duties as a Starship officer permit me very few luxuries of any kind."

She reached for a conciliatory tone. "You make it quite obvious that the *Enterprise* is your paramount interest." She paused before she added, "You know, Mr Spock, I have heard you turned down this assignment with Ambassador Kollos."

"I could not accept it," he said. "As you've pointed out, my life is here. And the Ambassador's quarters are also here." He indicated a cabin on their right.

There was a pedestal in the cabin. Setting the habitat down on it, Spock removed the anti-gravs. At the room's intercom, he said, "Spock to bridge. We have reached the Ambassador's quarters, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr Spock. Lieutenant Uhura, notify all hands to return to stations." Kirk sighed with relief as he turned to Sulu. "All right, helmsman. Let's take her out. Warp factor two."

"Warp factor two, sir."

In the cabin, Spock, vizored like Miranda, was eyeing the alien habitat. "Dr Jones," he said, "I should very much like to exchange greetings with Ambassador Kollos."

She smiled. "I am sure the Ambassador will be charmed."

Both of them placed a hand on the box. Then they went perfectly still, each absorbed in deep concentration. After a long moment the lid of the box lifted very slightly—and a light of purest blue streamed through the crack. Leaning forward, Spock peered into the box. Instantly, he recoiled; but after pausing to recover from the sight, he looked into it again. His lips moved in a smile of an almost childlike wonder.

The girl saw the smile. Once more resentment flashed in her eyes. The lid of the box fell. Unsmiling now, Spock said, "I almost envy you your assignment, Dr Jones."

"Do I read in your thoughts that you are tempted to take my place, Mr Spock?"

"No. But I feel your mind trying to touch mine, Doctor. Were you born a telepath?"

She nodded. "Yes. That is why I had to study on Vulcan."

"Of course," he said. "May I now show you to your quarters?"

"I'd better remain here a bit. Ambassador Kollos sometimes finds the process of Transport unsettling."

"Our ship's surgeon often makes the same complaint." He pointed to the intercom. "Call when you are ready."

He bowed and left the cabin. Miranda turned back to the habitat. She removed her vizor roughly, her beautiful face disturbed, doubtful, even apprehensive. In the solitude of the cabin, she cried out fiercely, "What did he see when he looked at you, Kollos? I have to know! I have to know!"

The *Enterprise* had done itself proud. Though dinner was over, hosts and guests still lingered over their brandy at a table elegant with crystal, candlelight, arrangements of fresh-cut flowers. All the officers wore dress uniforms; and Miranda, in silver-embroidered blue velvet, glowed like a blond pearl in the candlelight. Marvick, in civilian white tie and tails, was quiet but observant.

Kirk refilled the girl's brandy goblet. "I can't understand," he said, "why they're letting you go with Kollos."

"They, Captain?"

"The male population of the Federation. Didn't anyone try to talk you out of it?"

The black lashes drooped. "Well… now that you ask, yes."

"I'm glad he didn't succeed," Kirk said. "If he had, I'd never have met you." He raised his glass to her. "Tell me, Dr Jones, why isn't it dangerous for you to be with Kollos? Spock I can understand. Nothing makes any impression on him."

"Why, thank you, Captain," Spock said.

"Not at all, Mr Spock." He turned back to Miranda. "No other human is able to look at Kollos without going mad, even when vizored. How do you manage?"

"I spent four years on Vulcan studying their mental disciplines."

McCoy spoke. "You poor girl!" he cried with heartfelt sympathy.

Spock looked down the table at him. "Indeed, Doctor! I would say that the lady is very fortunate!"

"Vulcan disciplines are hardly my idea of fun."

"On Vulcan," the girl said, "I learned to do what it is impossible to learn anywhere else."

Smiling, Kirk asked, "How to read minds?"

"How *not* to read them, Captain."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Kirk said.

Spock interposed. "Dr Jones was born a telepath, Captain."

Miranda laughed. "Vulcan was necessary to my sanity, Captain! I had to learn how to close out the thoughts of others."

Spock nodded. "What humans generally find it impossible to understand is the need to shut out the bedlam of others' thoughts and emotions."

"Not to mention the bedlam of even one's *own* emotions," Miranda said. "On Vulcan one learns to do that, too." She reached out to touch a medallion pinned to Spock's breast. McCoy watched her fingers move over it.

Spock pulled back, fearful of scratching her. "Forgive me," he said. "I forget that dress uniforms can injure."

She leaned toward him. "I was merely interested in your Vulcan IDIC, Mr Spock. Is it a reminder that you could mind-meld with the Ambassador much more effectively than I could?"

There was an uncomfortable pause. She broke it hastily, explaining, "It would be most difficult for a Vulcan to see a mere human take on this exciting challenge, gentlemen."

"Interesting," McCoy said. "It's a fact, Spock, that you rarely wear your IDIC."

"Bones," Kirk said, "I doubt that our First Officer would don the most revered of all Vulcan symbols merely to annoy a guest."

Spock spoke for himself, looking straight at Miranda. "In fact, I wear it this evening to honor you, Dr Jones."

"Indeed?" she said.

"Yes," he said, "indeed. Perhaps, despite those years on Vulcan, you missed the true symbology of the IDIC." He placed his hand on the medallion. "The triangle and the circle… different shapes, materials, textures… they represent any two diverse things which come together to create truth or beauty." He rose, brandy glass in hand. "For example—Dr Miranda Jones, who has combined herself with the disciplines of my race to become greater than the sum of both!" .

Suddenly uneasy, Kirk saw that his lovely guest appreciated neither the grace nor the sincerity of Spock's gallantry. He changed the subject. "Back to your mission, Dr Jones. Do you feel a way can be found to employ Medeusan navigators on Starships? It would solve many of our present navigational problems."

"The key is the mind-link learned on Vulcan. Once we learn to form a corporate intelligence with Medeusans, designers of Starships—and that's where Larry Marvick comes in—can work on adapting instruments."

McCoy stirred in his chair. "I don't care how 'benevolent' the Medeusans are supposed to be. Isn't it suicidal to deal with something ugly enough to cause madness? Why do you do it?"

"Dr McCoy," Spock said, "I see that you still subscribe to the outmoded notion held by your ancient Greeks—the one which insists that what is good must also be beautiful."

Marvick spoke for the first time. "And the obverse of it—that what is beautiful is automatically expected to be good."

"I suppose," Kirk reflected, "that most of us are naturally attracted by beauty as we are repelled by ugliness. It's the last of our prejudices. But at the risk of sounding prejudiced—" He paused to raise his glass to Miranda. "Here's to Beauty!"

All the men rose and drank. McCoy lifted his glass a second time. "To Miranda Jones—the loveliest woman ever to grace a Starship!" He looked around at his fellow males. "How can one so beautiful condemn herself to look upon ugliness for the rest of her life? Will we allow it?"

His answer was a general shout of "No!"

McCoy sat down. "We must not permit her to leave us!"

Miranda was smiling at him. "How can one so full of the love of life as you, Dr McCoy, condemn himself to look upon suffering and disease for the rest of his life? Can we allow *that*, gentlemen?"

McCoy tipped his glass to her, sipping from it. "I drink to whatever it is you want most, Miranda."

As Kirk joined in the toast, he noticed how intently Marvick was staring at the girl. He was about to offer her more brandy when he was halted by the look of terror that had abruptly come into her face.

She rose to her feet, crying, "There's a murd—" She broke off and the flower she had been holding dropped to the table.

Kirk caught her arm. "Dr Jones, what is it?" .But McCoy was already beside her. "You're ill," he said. "Let me help you…"

She pulled away, her face slightly calmer. "There's someone nearby thinking of murder," she said.

Shocked silence fell over the table. She was clearly serious and Kirk said, "Who is it—can you tell?"

"It's… not there now. I… I can't pick it up at all."

"Was it in this room?" Kirk said.

She looked around her. "I don't know, Captain. It's gone now." She seemed to have regained her composure. "These things are usually momentary. A common human impulse, seldom acted out."

Spock's quiet voice said, "True. Otherwise the human race would have ceased to exist."

"Captain, do you mind if I say good night now? I'd love to visit your herbarium—but another time, if I may."

"Of course, Dr Jones. I'll see you back to—"

Spock interrupted. "Perhaps I could see you back to your quarters?"

McCoy was staring curiously at her. "Thank you, gentlemen," she said. "You make a choice impossible. Please stay here and enjoy yourselves. It was a delightful dinner."

"Sleep well, Miranda," Kirk said.

She waved a friendly good night to them. But McCoy, who was still watching her closely, went quickly to her at the door. "Are you sure you're well enough to find your way alone?"

"Yes, Dr McCoy. Please don't worry about me."

McCoy bowed and, reaching for her hand, kissed it lightly. As the door closed behind her, he said, "Where I come from, that's what's called a 'lady.'"

"She *is* something special," Kirk agreed.

"Very special! I suggest you treat her accordingly!"

Marvick's sudden outburst startled them all. The man picked up a napkin and dropped it. "I—I have not known Dr Jones for a long time. But long enough to be aware of her remarkable gifts!" He paused. "Well, it's been a long day for me…"

Scott said, "Would you like to stop off in Engineering, Larry? I have a few things to check; and a bottle of Scotch says you can't handle the controls you designed."

"Some other time," Marvick told him.

The door closed behind him. Turning away from it, Kirk looked Spock over. "Spock, you're really dressed up for the occasion. Very impressive."

"I genuinely intended to honor her, Captain." He moved to the door. "Good night, gentlemen."

His face unusually thoughtful, McCoy was still standing at the closed door. He looked at Kirk's handsome face.. "That's not just another girl, Jim. Don't make that mistake."

Kirk grinned. "I can see that for myself, Bones. Anything else?"

"I can't say exactly what it is. She seems very… vulnerable."

Kirk was smiling again. "We're all vulnerable, Dr McCoy… in one way or another."

"Yes. But there is something very disturbing about her."

"You'll get no argument from me, Bones. Meaning that she's quite a woman."

"Good night, Jim," McCoy said.

Alone, Kirk returned to the table. He retrieved the flower she had dropped and tucked it into the breast of his uniform.

Miranda's cabin was luxurious. She drifted around it, graceful but aimless, occasionally touching objects, perhaps because she admired them, perhaps to acquaint herself with the room's dimensions and contents. A buzz at her door sounded.

She leaned against it, calling, "Who is it?"

"Larry. I've got to talk to you."

"Larry, it's late.."..."

"Please, Miranda. It's important."

She opened the door. "All right. Come in, then."

Marvick's face had the haunted look of a man in desperate need of a drug. Closing the door behind him, he stood silent for a moment, looking at the girl. "I thought that dinner," he said, "was never going to end."

He moved closer to her. She backed away, putting distance between them. "I rather enjoyed it," she said.

"I know you did. I didn't. You were too far away."

"Larry, I'll be further away than that soon." Her tone was intended to be soothing. But it failed to soothe. "Don't speak of that!" Marvick cried. "Don't… no, we have to speak of it. There is so little time…" He reached for her but she eluded him, maintaining the little distance. "Please, Miranda, don't go with Kollos!"

She sighed. "Larry, we've been over that time and time again. Please accept—"

Marvick tried for lightness but his hunger broke through it. "Don't I know? I've begged you in restaurants, in the laboratory, on one knee, on both knees! Miranda, how can you do this to me?"

"If you would only try to understand…"

"What I understand is that you're a woman and I'm a man—one of your own kind! You think that Kollos will ever be able to give you anything like this?" He had her in his arms. The kiss crushed her lips against her teeth. Then his violence suddenly ended. He

held her quietly, caressing her hair, her throat, blind to the quickened anger in her eyes.

She freed herself. "You shouldn't have done that," she said coldly.

He ran a distracted hand over his face. "I'm sorry… Why, oh why did I ever meet you?"

"I have been honest with you," she said. "I simply cannot love you the way you want me to. And I am going with Kollos. That is final."

"Miranda, in God's name…!"

She went to the door. "I think you'd better leave now. I find you exhaust—" She suddenly broke off. Her hand went to her mouth to block a scream.

"So it's you!" she cried.

He lowered his head like an animal at bay. She was at the far side of the room now, her face white with shock. "I didn't know it was you before! Who is it you want to kill, Larry? Me? Larry, you must not keep such impulses to yourself! I can help you…"

"So now you want to 'help' me, do you? Well, now I know what a man has to do to get a response from you! A patient is what you want—not a man! Dr Jones, the great psychologist! Just for a change of pace, try to be a woman for once in your life!"

He slammed the door behind him. Outside at the elevator, he turned and went back. At her cabin, he hesitated before moving on down the corridor. His square jaw hard, he stopped at the door of the Medeusan's quarters. Firmly and deliberately, he pushed it open.

In the cabin's center the habitat still stood on its pedestal. It emitted a steady, pulsing sound. For a moment Marvick stood, tense, his back to it, hand on the door handle. Then he turned to look at the box, his eyes blazing with hatred. The pulsing sound grew louder, as though the box's occupant had been aroused to danger.

There was an instant when fear and fascination combined to immobilize Marvick. It passed. His hand went fast to the phaser at his belt. The lid of the habitat flashed open, enveloping Marvick in blinding light. He staggered, dropping the phaser. The Medeusan reared up. Marvick screamed as his hand whipped up to shield his eyes from the forbidden sight of Kollos.

Miranda sat bolt upright on her sleeping couch. Then her hand went to her throat. Leaping from the couch, she flew to her cabin

door. Panic ran with her as she raced down the corridor to Kollos's quarters.

In his light that still filled the room, she saw the phaser. Tears flooded her eyes. Arms outstretched, she went close to the habitat, crying, "Forgive me! Kollos, forgive me!"

The rhythm of the pulsing slowed.

Down in Engineering, Scott was adjusting a control, a yeoman at work nearby. The yeoman turned as the door opened, saw Marvick and signaled Scott. Scott beamed. "Ah, there you are, Larry! So you couldn't resist that little wager!"

Trembling, still in shock, Miranda had found the cabin's intercom. Kirk, listening to her incoherent whispers, jumped from his command chair, shouting, "Lieutenant Uhura, Mr Spock and Dr McCoy on the double! The Ambassador's quarters! Notify Security!"

He found two guards already at the door. He banged on it, calling, "Miranda… Miranda!"

Spock was arranging his vizor as the door opened. The girl, her own vizor in place, seemed to have recovered some composure. Silently, she passed the phaser to Kirk, lifting the mask from her eyes.

"Has the Ambassador been hurt?"

"No harm was done to him, Captain."

"Do you know who would do such a thing?"

"Larry Marvick."

Kirk stared. "Marvick? But why?"

"Madness prompted him."

Spock spoke quickly. "Did he see the Medeusan?"

"Yes, Mr Spock."

"Then insanity is the certain result. Dangerous insanity, Captain."

Kirk ran for the cabin intercom. While he ordered a Red Alert, Scott was turning the ship's controls over to Marvick. "They're all yours, Larry. That Scotch will be in your cabin tonight if you can handle them!"

Kirk's filtered voice reached Engineering. "Captain Kirk to all ship personnel. An attempt has been made to murder Ambassador Kollos. The man is dangerously insane. He is Lawrence Marvick. Be on the watch for him. Kirk out."

Scott's jaw fell. Pulling himself together, he tried to push Marvick away from the controls, but the man's joined fists came crashing

down on him with all the force of madness. Scott crumpled. The yeoman leaped for Marvick's back and was smashed to the deck.

The ship groaned under the lash of sudden acceleration. Staggering, Kirk, Spock and McCoy looked at each other. The ship's groan had become a whine when they raced out of the bridge elevator.

"Explain, Mr Sulu!" Kirk shouted.

"I can't, sir. But we're traveling at warp factor eight point five."

"And still accelerating, Captain," Chekov said.

Spock looked at the helm console. "Our deflectors can't hold unless speed is immediately reduced."

"Lieutenant Uhura, put me through to Engineering!"

She turned to her console, bracing herself against the ship's shuddering. "Captain, they don't answer…"

Sulu said, "Warp factor nine, accelerating."

Kirk wheeled to Spock. "Mr Spock, can you disengage the power from here?"

Spock already lay on his back, reaching inside a wall panel. "We shall try to, Captain. Mr Chekov, come here, please. I need you."

Uhura turned. "I seem to have Engineering, Captain."

"Put it on the intercom, Lieutenant."

He heard Marvick's voice. It was singing. "We'll make it! We're under way now! We'll make it—and get out of here!"

A maniacal laugh echoed through the bridge.

Kirk hit the intercom. "Security! Get down to Engineering!"

Miranda appeared at his elbow. "I'll go with you," she said.

"No."

"I must, Captain. I can reach his mind."

After a moment, he nodded.

In the corridor outside Engineering, two Security guards were trying to open the door. "He's jammed it, Captain," one said. "But with another good pull…"

It opened. Marvick, at the controls, was manipulating them easily and skillfully. But his dementia was unmistakable. Moans of genuine anguish were followed by seizures of uncontrollable giggles. When he saw Kirk standing quietly beside him, he chuckled. "Don't worry, Kirk. We'll be safe soon. Over the boundaries of the universe. We can hide there…"

Kirk made a grab for the controls and Sulu's voice said, "Warp speed nine point five and accelerating, Captain."

Marvick had lashed out at Kirk with a thick metal tool. The guards closed in on him, pinning his furiously flailing arms behind his back. Scott, crawling to his feet, was moving groggily toward the controls when the ship broke out of the galaxy. In a flash of searing light, the shapes of people, instruments—everything—dissolved into nameless colors, confused and changing. A roar so deafening it lost the quality of sound hammered at the trembling *Enterprise*. The ship stopped, hanging suspended in a space of alien colors.

Kirk had been flung across the deck. As the roar diminished, he got slowly to his feet. Marvick, still held tight by the guards, was whispering, "We're safe. We made it. We're safe, Kirk. We made it over the boundaries of the galaxy."

McCoy was on his knees. Kirk nodded to him. Bones hauled himself up and, opening his medikit, stepped behind Marvick. But the hypo's needle had barely touched him when he made a lunge that almost broke the guards' hold.

Kirk said, "Marvick, it will help you sleep."

The tortured creature shrieked. "No! No! We mustn't sleep! Never! Never again. No sleep! Never! They come into your dreams. Then they can suffocate you! No sleep—no dreams. No! No!"

Kirk went to him. "All right, Larry. No sleep. No dreams. Just come with me. I have a better biding place for you. I'll take you to it. Come…"

Marvick made another break for the controls. "We must be ready to speed, Kirk! Speed! Speed on to the next galaxy. Away from here! Away!"

The wildly roving eyes caught sight of Miranda. Marvick tore his arms free and stretched them out to her. Then he collapsed. Kirk nodded to the guards, who released him. Supporting the limp body in his own arms, Kirk saw that Marvick's eyes had filled with tears. "Miranda… Miranda," he was whispering. "You… are here… with me…"

Kirk carried him to a bench. The girl came to kneel beside Marvick. "Yes, Larry," she said. "I am here."

The madman cupped her face in his hands. "I didn't lose you. My beautiful love. I thought I… had lost you."

"I am here, Larry."

For the first time, Kirk saw the depth of Marvick's love. The tears were wet on the man's face and his body was trembling. Miranda looked up at Kirk. "I see what he sees," she said and, turning back to Marvick, spoke softly. "Don't, Larry. Don't think of what you saw. Don't think of it…"

He uttered a scream of pain, pushing her away. "Liar! Deceiver! You're not alone! He's here! He's here! You brought him with you!"

The jealous hate rose in him again. He caught the girl by the throat. The Security guards moved quickly to help Kirk loosen his clutch. This time McCoy was fast with his hypo.

Kirk lifted Miranda in his arms. Watching them, Marvick spoke quietly. "Do not love her. She will kill you if you love her. Do not love her."

Kirk looked down at the woman in his arms, the warning in his ears. He carried her to the door when the dying man behind him called, "I love you, Miranda…"

"Where are we, Mr Spock?"

The bridge viewing screen showed only tangles of those alien, nameless, ever-changing colors. Spock lifted his head from hard work at his library computer. "Far outside our own galaxy, Captain, judging from the lack of any traceable reference points."

"What you mean is we're nowhere," Chekov said.

Nowhere. Kirk moved restlessly in his command chair as McCoy, a paper in his hand, came out of the elevator.

"May I interrupt, Jim?"

"Yes, Bones."

"I've got the autopsy on Marvick. Heart stopped: cause unknown. Brain activity stopped: cause unknown… Shall I go on?"

"You mean he simply died?"

"I mean he evidently couldn't live with what he saw." Kirk looked unseeingly at the screen. "Or with what he felt." Remembering the mad eyes dripping tears, Kirk sighed. Nowhere. But back to business just the same. He turned to Scott. "How much damage to the engines, Scotty?"

"We'll need some repairs, sir, but the ship is basically intact."

"Mr Spock, can you at least give us a position report?"

"Impossible to calculate, Captain. We lack data to analyze. Our instruments seem to function normally but what they tell us makes

no sense." He paused. "Our records are reasonably clear up to the point at which we left our galaxy."

"We should be able to navigate back."

"We have no reference points to use in plotting a return course, Captain. We experienced extreme sensory distortion; and will do so again if we try to use warp speed. Nor can we recross the barrier at sublight speed."

"A madman got us into this and it's beginning to look as if only a madman can get us out."

"An entertaining suggestion, Mr Chekov," Spock said. "Unhelpful, however."

Kirk rose and went to Spock. "The Medeusans have developed interstellar navigation to a fine art. Could Kollos function as a navigator in spite of the sensory distortion?"

"Very possibly, sir. The Medeusan's sensory system is radically different from ours. Perhaps, for the purpose of this emergency, I could become Kollos. And he become Spock."

"Explain."

"A fusion, Captain. A mind-link to create a double entity. Each of us will possess the knowledge and capabilities of both. We will function as one being."

"What are the hazards?"

"If the link is successful, there'll be a tendency to lose separate identity. It is a necessary risk." He hesitated, his eyes on Kirk's. "Of course, the lady will not want to give me permission to establish the link."

"I don't think she'd want *anyone* to intrude on the kind of rapport she has with Kollos," McCoy said.

"Dr Jones," Spock said, "has shown reluctance whenever I have asked to converse with Kollos. In some ways she is still most human, Captain. Particularly in the vigor of her jealousy and her thirst for power."

Kirk didn't speak, and Spock went on. "Her telepathic powers are also formidable. If it is at all possible, her mind must be so engaged that no other thoughts will intrude on it."

"I think that can be arranged," Kirk said.

McCoy looked at him. "Jim, don't take this lightly. She's extremely sensitive. If you try to be devious with her, she'll know."

"Bones, I know what's at stake. I have no intention of playing games with Miranda."

He turned on his heel and left the bridge.

The Starship's herbarium was odorous with the mingled scents of flowers.

Kirk released Miranda's arm. "I may be sentimental, but this is my favorite room. It reminds me of Earth."

"I've never been to Earth. But what lovely flowers! May I touch them, Captain?"

He smiled at her. "Go ahead."

She moved down the path, stopping to stroke a velvety petal, a leaf. Watching her, Kirk thought: *She's a blossom herself*. But a spray of butterfly orchids disappointed her. "They have no scent," she complained, turning to Kirk.

"Try these."

They were roses, white, yellow, pale pink, some nearly black. She plunged her face into them, inhaling their perfume with delight. Suddenly she cried out, pulled away and with a grimace of pain put her hurt finger to her mouth.

Kirk took her hand. "Let me see…"

"It was just a thorn," she said hastily, removing the hand. Kirk recovered it. Gently, he rubbed her finger. "I was hoping to make you forget about thorns today," he said.

"It doesn't hurt anymore."

"You mustn't blame yourself," he said, "because Marvick loved you."

Her abrupt ferocity startled him. "I don't! I didn't want his love! I couldn't return it—and I had no use for it!"

Kirk spoke slowly. "Surely, sooner or later you will want human love—a man to companion you."

She pushed aside a strand of silver-blond hair. "Shall I tell you what human companionship means to me? A battle! Defense against others' emotions! When I'm tired and my guard slips, their feelings burst in on me like a storm. Hatred, desire, envy, pity—pity's the worst of all! I agree with the Vulcans. Violent emotion is a kind of insanity."

"So you will spend the rest of your life with Medeusans to avoid human feelings?"

"Perhaps."

"A meeting of minds isn't enough. What are you going to do for love hunger, Miranda?"

She turned her back on him. "You will never understand me. I don't think you should try, Captain."

He pulled her around to face him. "Look. You are young, human. No matter how beautiful the Medeusans' minds are, they are alien to yours! You'll yearn for the sight and sound of a human like yourself—arid weary of ugliness!"

The black-lashed eyes blazed. "Ugly! What *is* ugly? You have never seen Kollos! Who are you to say whether he is too ugly to bear or too beautiful to bear?"

"I did not mean to insult you. Please, Miranda…"

As she ripped a leaf from the rosebush beside her, Spock was striding down the corridor to Kollos's cabin.

Kirk wasn't a man to be fazed by female tantrums. He picked up the leaf she'd flung down. "Well," he said, "we can agree upon one thing, anyway. We both like roses. I wish I had moonlight for you, too: I'd like to see what moonlight would do to that hair of yours." He reached for her but she evaded him with a little laugh.

"I see you're a very complicated man, Captain."

He had her, unresisting, in his arms. "Play fair," he whispered into the ear on his shoulder. "You're not supposed to know what I'm thinking about. I'm supposed to show you."

He felt her stiffen. She released herself with a surprising strength. "He's with Kollos!" she cried. "Oh no, you mustn't let him do it!" She turned and ran down the path. He caught her. "Miranda! You can't leave just as…"

She tore herself free. "Let me go! You don't realize! You don't know what a dangerous thing Spock is planning! Please, please, we must stop him!"

Kirk followed her at a run.

Spock was standing at the door of the Medeusan's quarters. He turned as they burst out of the elevator. Miranda tried to shove him aside. Grave, entirely composed, he looked at her. "The *Enterprise* is at stake, Dr Jones. It is not possible for you to be involved."

"Why? I've already committed myself to mind-link with Kollos!" She whirled to Kirk. "Why do you allow him to place himself in jeopardy?"

"Mine is a duty you cannot assume," Spock said. "The vital factor to be considered is not telepathic competence. It is to pilot this ship. That is something you cannot do."

"Then teach me to pilot it! I can memorize instantly. Set any test you choose. After only one rehearsal, I shall be able to operate all the machinery on this vessel!"

McCoy had hurried out of the elevator. He rushed to the group, shouting, "Wait a minute!" He looked at the girl—and made his decision. "Miranda, I know you can do almost anything a sighted person can do—but you cannot pilot a Starship!"

She shrank back, stricken.

"What?" Kirk said.

"I'm sorry," McCoy said. "But the occasion calls for realism. You are blind, Miranda. And there are some things you just can't do."

Spock was eyeing the silvery embroidery on her sleeve. "Ah," he said. "A highly sophisticated sensor web. My compliments to your dressmaker, Dr Jones."

The enigma unraveled for Kirk. She was safe with Kollos because she couldn't see him.

"I think I understand now," he said. "I know now why pity is the worst of all, Miranda."

She flung her head high. "Pity which I do not deserve! Do you gather more information with your eyes than I do with my sensors? I could play tennis with you, Captain! I might even beat you. I am standing here exactly one meter and four centimeters from the door! Can you judge distance that accurately?"

"That won't be necessary," Kirk said gently. "Spock will make the mind-link. For your sake as well as ours."

"No! I won't let you do this!"

McCoy said, "I appeal to you as a colleague, Dr Jones—don't fight us like this."

"No!"

"If none of us can persuade you, there is someone who can." Kirk used his command voice. "You will take this matter up with Ambassador Kollos."

She glared at him. Jerking open the cabin door, she entered and slammed it behind her.

Kirk eyed McCoy. "Why didn't you tell me, Bones?"

"She'd have told you herself if she'd wanted you to know. I respect her privacy."

"There's a great deal about this particular lady to resp—" Kirk stopped at the sound of a broken cry from the cabin. Unshamed tears streaming down her face, Miranda opened its door. McCoy started to her, but thinking better of it, waited for her to make the first move. It was to drag an arm across her tear-wet face. In the gesture was a childlike quality that went straight to Kirk's heart.

Still sobbing, she said, "It… seems that I have no choice… but to obey you."

The habitat had been removed to the bridge. A rigid metal screen hid it from all eyes but Spock's; and his were vizored. People barely breathed. Even the ship seemed to hold her breath. The sole sound was the quiet, majestic rhythm of Kollos's life support system. Alone with the black box behind the screen, Spock knelt and lifted the lid. The pure blue light flooded his face.

Hands pressed against the surface of the box, he leaned forward until his temples touched it. He backed away, gasping, eyes closed behind the vizor, his forehead beaded with sweat. A shudder shook him. Then, resolutely, he opened his eyes, inviting the light again.

Kirk's hands were wet. Still as cats, McCoy and Sulu waited. Chekov, at Spock's station, moved no buttons. Next to him, Uhura buried her face in her hands.

Somebody whispered, "Mr Spock…"

Spock had stepped from behind .the screen, pulling off the vizor. He looked relaxed, younger. And when he spoke, his voice was younger, warm and tender.

"How delightful to see you again!" he said. "I know you, all of you! James' Kirk, my Captain and dear friend for years…"

He took a step toward Kirk, looking around him with interest. "And Leonard McCoy, another friend. And Uhura, whose name means freedom! Uhura who walks in beauty like the night…"

The shocked McCoy cried, "That can't be Spock!"

Cool and precise, Spock said, "Does it surprise you that I've read Byron, Doctor?"

"That's Spock!" McCoy said.

A mind-link to create a double entity. Those had been Spock's own words. "Am I… addressing the Medeusan Ambassador?" Kirk asked.

A radiant smile lit Spock's face. "In part—that is, that part of us that is known to you as Kollos. Where is Miranda? Ah, there you are! O, brave new world that boasts such beauty in it!"

She spoke harshly. "Tis new to thee, Mr Spock."

His tone was that of a lover. "*My* world is next for you and me."

Kirk couldn't decipher the expression on her face, but she seemed to feel a need to hold herself under rigid control. But Spock's face was alive with such a naked tenderness that Kirk

averted his eyes from it. The girl edged over to McCoy and Spock advanced to the command chair.

"Captain Kirk, I speak for all of us you call Medeusans.

I am sorry for the trouble I have brought to your ship."

"We can't hold you to blame for what happened, Ambassador. Thank you for helping us now."

The smile vanished. Spock was back, efficient, composed. "Now to the business at hand. With your permission, Captain?"

Kirk said, "Mr Sulu, release the helm to Mr Spock, please."

"Aye, sir."

At Sulu's console, Spock made rapid adjustments of switches. "Coordination is completed, Captain."

"Go ahead, then, Mr Spock."

The engines began to throb again. "Warp factor one in six seconds," Spock said. "Five seconds…"

The ship was picking up speed. "Two seconds. One. Zero…"

The searing light inundated the bridge. The great roar hammered. Bolt upright at the helm, Spock took the *Enterprise* back into its galaxy. "Position report, Mr Chekov," he called.

Chekov's eyes were agog with admiration. "Bull's eye, Mr Spock! Our position is so close to the point where we entered the void that the difference isn't worth mentioning!"

"That completes the maneuver, Captain," Spock said.

"Take over, Mr Sulu."

As Spock vacated the helm, Kirk got to his feet. "Thank you, Ambassador. And now, Mr Chekov, let's get her back on course."

Spock, flexing a hand, was intently examining it. The radiance shone in his face. "How compact your bodies are! And what a variety of senses you have! This thing you call language—it's most remarkable. You depend on it for so much. But is any of you really its master?" A look of infinite compassion came into his face. "But the aloneness. You are all so alone. How sad that you must live out your lives in this shell of flesh, contained and separate—how lonely you are, how lonely…"

A warning bell sounded in Kirk's memory. The risk of the fusion was loss of separate identity. He turned in his chair. "Ambassador. It is time to dissolve the mind-link."

Who had answered him—Spock or Kollos? Kirk couldn't tell. But the words seemed to come from a great distance.

"So soon?"

Kirk got to his feet. "You must not delay."

"You are wise, Captain."

With a debonair wave of the hand, Spock crossed to the metal screen, disappearing behind it. Miranda slipped after him to stand near the screen, her face concentrated, unreadable.

Uhura spoke. "Captain, Starfleet is calling."

"Audio, Lieutenant."

A radio voice cried, "*Enterprise!* Where have you people been?"

Behind the screen a kneeling Spock was bathed again in the pure blue radiance. As Kollos vacated his mind, he bowed his head under an oppressive sense of bereavement. He could hear Kirk saying, "Give them our position, Lieutenant. Tell them we'll send a full report later."

"Captain!"

The horror in Sulu's voice spun Kirk around to the helm station. Spock's forgotten vizor lay in Sulu's hand.

"Spock!" Kirk shouted. "Don't look! Cover your eyes!"

His cry was lost in the scream that came from behind the screen.

The shriek came again. Instinctively McCoy started toward the screen but was stopped dead in his tracks by Kirk's gesture of absolute command. "No! Don't move!"

"But, Jim…"

"No one is to move!" Kirk gave himself a moment to rally before he called, "Spock, are you all right?"

Time moved sluggish and slow. Kirk waited for the seconds to crawl by. Then Spock, backing out from behind the screen, turned his face to them. It was both terrified and terrifying—totally insane.

Kirk went to him, his hands outstretched. "It's all right now, Spock. You are safe with me."

But Spock had been transported to an unreachable realm. Lowering his head, he lunged at Kirk, aiming a fatal blow. Kirk ducked—and Spock, his madness distractible and purposeless, ripped out a lever from a console, hurling it across the bridge. Roaring like a wounded beast, he raged through the room, smashing at people and objects. Kirk found position for a straight phaser shot and stunned him at close range.

McCoy ran to the stilled body. Looking up, he cried, "He's hardly breathing, Jim! I must get him to Sickbay at once!"

Again time crawled by. Spock, insane, perhaps dying there before Kirk's eyes. As Marvick had died. Kirk covered his face with his hands to shut out the sight of the deathly white face on Sickbay's examination table. That brain of Spock's, whose magnificent resources had wrung victories out of countless defeats, deranged, lost to the *Enterprise*, lost to the friends who loved him. Behind his hands, Kirk could feel the skin of his face drawing into lines of haggard agony.

"Miranda," McCoy said. "Unless she reaches down into his mind and turns it outward to us, we will lose Spock, Jim."

Kirk could bear the sight of the world again. "Vulcan mind techniques!" Then his heart cringed. "She tried to help Marvick. She couldn't. He's dead."

"That was different. Marvick loved her."

Kirk paced restlessly. "Would she so much as try? Spock is her rival. He felt her jealousy of him."

"They were not rivals in love," McCoy said.

Kirk looked at him. "No. That's true. Bones, I'm taking action. Don't interfere with it. No matter what happens." He strode to the door of Sickbay and closed it behind him.

Miranda was in her cabin. And she knew what he'd come for. Telepathy, he thought grimly, had its advantages. It made explanation unnecessary. When she emerged from her bedroom, she was wearing a stark black tunic bare of the silver embroidery sensors. Truly blind now, she had to be guided to the door.

McCoy had had the examination table tilted almost upright. Spock's waxen, unmoving body was strapped to it. Kirk led Miranda over to it. "Your mind-link with him," he said. "It must bring him back from wherever he is."

Nearly as pale as Spock, she said, "You must leave us alone, Captain."

At his desk McCoy didn't speak. Once more Kirk waited. If the memories of Spock's loyal valor would only stop returning… but they wouldn't stop. And what was going on in that examination room? Spock had spoken of her "thirst for power."

Kirk walked into the examination room.

She looked up at the sound of the opening door. "Dr McCoy?"

"It's I, the Captain."

"I have no news for you." She paused. "His life processes are failing."

The blue, blind eyes had groped for his. Kirk steeled himself against a wave of compassion for her. "And what are you doing about it?"

"Why… what I can, of course."

"It doesn't seem to be much!"

It sparked a flash 'of anger from her. "No doubt you expect me to wake up your Sleeping Beauty with a kiss!"

The compassion died in him. "It might be worth trying," he told her. "He's not a machine."

"He is a Vulcan!" she cried.

"Half of him. The other half is human—a half more human than you seem to be!"

She faced him, rage working in her face. "Face reality, Captain Kirk. His mind has gone too deep even for me to reach."

"And if you don't reach it, he will die. Isn't that what you want?"

She stared at him wordlessly, her mouth open. Then, in a small, unbelieving voice, she said, "Why… that is a lie!"

"You want him to die," Kirk said.

He caught her by the arm. "What did you do on the bridge? Did you make him forget to vizor his eyes?"

She wrenched her arm free. "*You* are insane."

He seized it again, his jaw hard. "You know your rival! He made a mind-link with Kollos—exactly what you have never been able to do!"

She struck at him, beating at his face with her fists. He immobilized her hands, holding her tight within the hard circle of his arms. "With my words," he said, "I will make you hear the ugliness Spock saw when his naked eyes looked at Kollos! Ugliness is deep in you, Miranda!"

"Liar! Liar! Liar!" she screamed.

"Listen to me. Your passion to see Kollos is madness. You are blind. You can never see him. Never! But Spock has seen him. And for that he must die. That's it, isn't it?"

She twisted in his arms. "Sadistic, filthy liar…"

"You smell of hatred. The stench of jealousy fills you. Why don't you strangle him as he lies there, helpless?"

Strength drained out of her. "No… no… don't say any more, please."

"Kollos knows what is hid your heart. You can lie to yourself—but you can't lie to Kollos."

"Go away! Please… go away."

Kirk released her. She staggered but he reached no hand to help her. The door closed behind him.

In his office McCoy got up from his desk. Kirk sank into his chair and, leaning his arms on the desk, rested his head on them, shaken, exhausted.

"Are you all right?" McCoy asked.

Kirk didn't answer. McCoy laid a hand on the bowed shoulders. "What did you say to her, Jim?"

Kirk lifted his head. "Maybe too much."

"What is she doing in there? If she can't—"

"Maybe I shouldn't have gone in, Bones."

"Jim…"

"I went at her in the dark. In her darkness. In her blindness. If he dies…"

"Don't, Jim."

"If he dies, how do I know I didn't kill him? How can I know she can stand to hear the truth?"

In the room behind them, she had moved to Spock, her fingers probing at his temples. In a whisper choked with fury, she was saying, "This is to the death—or life for both of us. Do you hear me, Spock?"

He was in a cavern, his eyes open. Over him hovered a Miranda, her hair a writhing nest of snakes. They hissed at him, their fangs dripping venom. He let it drip on his face. The Miranda laughed demoniacally. The venom stung. Then there were three Mirandas, chuckling with pleasure in his pain. When he put his hands over his ears to shut out the hideous chuckles, there were seven Mirandas. He groveled on his knees, clutching at his ears. The laughing stopped.

But the Fury wasn't finished with him. The cavern was a pool. A Miranda had him by the throat. She was very strong and he was tired. The water of the pool closed over his head. She pushed it down… down. His hands felt heavy, clumsy, strangely disobedient. But at last they did his bidding and tore her grasp from his throat. The water still dragged at him. Then his soul moved. He stumbled out of the water's hold; and in a curious unsurprise, realized that the Miranda was helping him. He coughed frothy water from his

lungs, and dreamily heard the Miranda say, "So you have decided to live after all. But there is one thing more—the madness…"

A box lid was open, radiating a blue light he seemed to remember. He was about to look into the half-familiar box when its lid dropped.

He was very tired. There was a door in front of him. On a last spurt of strength, he opened it.

"Spock!"

It was the voice of his dear Captain.

Spock staggered to him. In his flood of returning sanity, he recognized McCoy. But as usual the Doctor was fussing. "You have no business to be out of bed! Sit here!"

He sat. His Captain left him to go somewhere else, calling, "Miranda!"

But if there had ever been a Miranda around, she was gone.

With meticulous care Spock placed Kollos's habitat on the Transporter platform. His hands lingered on the box—a final communion. Kirk looked at the hands, his eyes warm with affection. Pointing to Spock, he smiled at the woman beside him. "I have you to thank for his life," he said.

He spoke to a different Miranda—one transfigured by the same wondering innocence that had entered into Spock during his mind-link with Kollos. McCoy, moved by the new purity of her lovely face, said, "You now have what you wanted most, Miranda?"

"Yes. I am one with Kollos."

McCoy took her hand and kissed it. "I am truly sorry that you are leaving us."

She stepped back to Kirk. "We have come to the end of an eventful trip, Captain."

"I wasn't sure you'd even speak to me."

The blue radiance of the box was in her blue eyes. "I have you to thank for my future. What you said has enabled me to see. I shall not need my sensors anymore."

He lifted a white rose from the Transporter console. "My good-bye gift to you," he said.

The rose against her cheek, she said, "I suppose it has thorns, Captain."

"I never met a rose that didn't, Miranda."

At the platform, Spock, in dress uniform, was wearing his IDIC. The girl touched it. “I understand the symbology, now, Mr Spock. The marvel is in the infinite diversity of life.”

He met her eyes gravely. “And in the ways our differences can combine to create new truth and beauty;”

She took her position on the platform as Spock adjusted his vizor for the last time. Then he lifted his hand in the Vulcan salute.

She returned it. “Peace and long life to you, Mr Spock,” she said.

“Peace and long life, Miranda.”

At the Transporter console, Kirk himself moved the dematerializing switches.

THE EMPATH

(Joyce Muskat)

The second star in the Minarian system was entering a critical period of its approaching nova phase. Accordingly, the *Enterprise* had been ordered to evacuate personnel of the research station which was established on the star to study the phenomena of its coming death. But all the Starship's attempts to contact the scientists had failed. Kirk, his urgent mission in mind, decided to beam down to the surface to try to locate their whereabouts.

He, Spock and McCoy materialized on a bleak landscape, grim and forbidding under a sky already red with the light of the imminent nova. A gust of harsh wind blew dirt in their faces. It also rattled the door of a metal hut a few yards to their right. "It's the research station," Kirk said. He led the way to it. Its door gave way under a push. The hut was deserted, but its ulterior, a combination of living quarters and laboratory, was neatly arranged. In a corner, Kirk spotted a video-tape recorder.

Spock ran his hand over a table. "Dust," he said. "Apparently, their instruments have not been recently in use."

The recorder still held a tape card. Kirk was about to insert it when his communicator beeped. Handing the tape to Spock, he flipped it open. It said, "*Enterprise* to Captain Kirk. Come in, please."

"Kirk here. Go ahead, *Enterprise*."

"Scott here, Captain. Our instruments have picked up a gigantic solar flare with very high levels of cosmic rays."

"How bad?" Kirk said.

"Sensors indicate cosmic-ray concentration measures 3.51 on the Van Allen scale. It'll play the devil with the crew as well as the ship, sir."

Spock spoke. "On that basis it will take exactly 74.1 solar hours for the storm to pass, Captain."

"Warp her out of orbit right now! Mr Scott, stay at the minimum distance for *absolute* safety!"

"Aye, aye, sir. We'll beam you up in—"

Kirk interrupted, "Negative. We're staying here. The atmosphere of the planet will protect us. Now get my ship out of danger, Mr Scott!"

"Very well, Captain. Scott out."

"Kirk out." Closing his communicator, he turned to Spock. "Mr Spock… how about that tape?"

Spock had been examining it. As he inserted it into the recorder, he said, "Whatever we see and hear, Captain, happened approximately two weeks ago."

Activated, the device's viewing screen lit up. It showed two men checking equipment against the hut's background. "The one on the left is Dr Linke," Kirk said. "The other is Dr Ozaba. Does the speaker work, Spock?"

It worked. Linke was saying, "? another week in this godforsaken place…"

He lurched to the shaking of a brief earthquake. Ozaba grinned. "*In His hand are the deep places of the earth*. Psalm 95, Verse 4.1 wish He'd calm them down…"

Abruptly, sound and picture ended. The recorder emitted a deep organ-like chord. It grew louder—and the picture returned to image the scientists searching for the source of the sound. Their lips moved but their voices were overwhelmed by the rising chord's reverberation. Suddenly Ozaba clutched his head, staggering in pain. As Linke rushed forward to help him, Ozaba winked out. Terrified, Linke stared around the hut. Then he too began to stagger. He disappeared. The sound faded and the screen went blank.

Appalled, McCoy cried, "Jim, what happened to them?"

As though in answer the strange sound came again, gathering around the *Enterprise* men. Spock swiftly unlimbered his tricorder while Kirk and McCoy frantically searched for some clue to the noise.

"Where's it coming from?" Kirk shouted. "Spock, can you pin it down?"

"Negative, Captain! This 'sound' doesn't register on my tricorder!" He bent his head to check the instrument when his eyes glazed. His hands went to his head as though the increasing sound were crushing it. He reeled drunkenly. Kirk, rushing to him, put out an arm to steady him. Then Spock winked out.

Kirk stared around him in horror. The sound intensified. "Bones!" Kirk yelled. "Spock—he's gone!"

But McCoy was gripping his head. Then, he too staggered. Even as Kirk raced to him, he vanished. Stunned, Kirk stood still. The hammer of sound beat at him. He began to struggle forward like a man fighting the pull of a monstrous magnet. He stumbled against a metal staircase and fell, cutting his head. As he hauled himself back to his feet, he winked out.

The triumphant sound rose higher in the empty hut.

Time passed. How much, they never knew. But something had transported them into the center of an arena-like place. When a blinding, overhead, circular light came on, they found themselves able to move. Kirk groped up to his knees. Beyond the circle of light, the arena's boundaries were lost in total darkness. The cut on his head throbbed.

"Bones… Spock. Spock, where are we?"

McCoy had seen the cut. He reached for his medikit and, struggling to his feet, dealt with the injury. Spock was checking his tricorder. "We are exactly 121:32 meters below the planet's surface, Captain."

"How did we get here?"

"Residual energy readings indicate that we were beamed here by a matter-energy scrambler not dissimilar to our own Transporter mechanism."

"Is that cut very painful, Jim?"

Kirk nodded, shrugging; and Spock, his eyes still on his tricorder, said, "Captain, I'm picking up a life form… bearing 42 mark seven."

"Could it be one of the missing scientists?"

"Negative, sir. Although humanoid, it is definitely not *Homo sapiens*."

"Identification?"

"Impossible. I can make no exact identification other than that it is humanoid."

"Then let's find out what it is. Phasers on stun!"

It was the tricorder that guided them through the dimness ahead. The brilliant light which had illuminated the arena's center didn't reach to its outer space. But, stumbling along it, they could finally discern what seemed to be a narrow, circular platform—a platform or a couch. On it lay a figure. It was very still.

Spock extended the tricorder. "The life form, Captain."

"What is it?" Kirk said.

The creature stirred. As it sat up, lights blazed in a sharply outlined circle over the couch. The being stood up. It had the body

of a girl and it was clothed in a gossamer stuff that glittered with the sparkle of diamonds. Her skin was dead white. Dark hair clustered around her temples. But it was her eyes that riveted Kirk's. They were large, shining—the most expressive eyes he'd ever seen in his life.

McCoy started forward.

"Careful!" Kirk said sharply.

"She seems to be harmless enough, Jim."

"The sand-bats of Manark-4," Spock said, "appear to be inanimate rock crystals before they attack."

Kirk moved cautiously toward her. "I am James Kirk, Captain of the USS *Enterprise*." He gestured back to the others. "This is my Science Officer, Mr Spock, and Doctor McCoy, Ship's Surgeon. We are not going to hurt you." He paused, still fascinated by the eyes. "Do you live here? Is this… your home?"

She didn't answer.

"Spock, analysis?"

"From what we know of gravity and other environmental conditions on this planet, a life form such as hers could not evolve here," McCoy said.

"Agreed, Doctor," Spock said. "She is obviously not of this planet."

"Why are you here?" Kirk asked her.

She shrugged. He persisted. "Are you responsible for bringing us here?" Despite her eyes, he was beginning to feel exasperated. "At least you must know how you got here!"

She shrank back. Aware that he had frightened her, Kirk relaxed. "Don't be afraid," he said gently. "You must not fear me." His reassurance didn't seem to reassure her. How should he approach this sensitive creature with the remarkable eyes? He turned to McCoy. "What about it, Bones? What's wrong with her?"

McCoy looked up from his readings. "She's mute… no vocal cords, not even vestigials. And it doesn't look like a pathological condition."

"Explain."

"As far as I can tell, she's perfectly healthy. As for the other, my guess is that the lack of vocal cords is physiologically normal for her species, whatever that is."

"A whole race of mutes… like the Gamma Vertis-4 civilization?"

"That's my opinion, for what it's worth."

"Without speech, how's she able to understand us? Unless she's a telepath. Could telepathic power have been used to bring us here?"

Spock said, "An unlikely possibility, Captain. Over ninety-eight percent of the known telepathic species send thoughts as well as receive them. She has made no attempt to contact our thoughts."

Kirk looked at her intently for a long moment. Then his hand went to his forehead, pressing tightly against its pulsing ache. As he sank down on the couch, something in the girl's white face moved McCoy to say, "We can't keep calling her 'she' as though she weren't here!"

"You have any suggestions?" Kirk said.

"I don't know about you two, but I'm going to call her 'Gem.'" Conscious of Spock's raised eyebrow, he added a defiant, "At least it's better than 'hey you'!"

Kirk got to his feet. "I want to know why we're here—what's going on. The girl may know. Spock, try the Vulcan mind meld."

Nodding, Spock went to the couch, hands extended to make contact with her. But she had watched his approach with panic. Spock, touching her arm, recoiled.

"Spock, what is it!"

"Her mind doesn't function like ours, Captain. I felt it trying to draw on *my* consciousness. Like a magnet. I could gain nothing from her."

High above their heads, like a theater's mezzanine, was a semicircular construction. And like a theater director and stage manager, placed for a different viewpoint of the actors below them, two figures were observing the little drama being enacted on the platform-stage beneath them. An organ chord sounded.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy whirled as one man.

Slowly the figures descended from their eminence. Tall, clad in floor-length robes, their bodies were muscular and agile but their faces were old, their heads bald. Among the wrinkles of great age, their eyes blazed with a purpose that was barren of all warmth or emotion. Each bore a curious silver object in his right hand. It had the shape of a T. Ignoring the men, they advanced on the cowering Gem. Again, as one man, the *Enterprise* trio moved forward protectively in front of her.

Kirk spoke. "I am—"

He was interrupted. The figure on the left said, "We are aware of your identity, Captain."

"Who are you? Why have you brought us here?"

The voice was as cold as death. "We are Vians. My name is Lal. This is Thann." A finger pointed to Gem. "Do not interfere!"

"What do you intend to do to her?"

"Delay us no longer!"

It was Thann who spoke. As he started forward, Kirk moved swiftly to block his way to the girl. Lal raised his silver T-bar and Kirk was hurled up and over her couch. The crashdown reopened the cut on his forehead. It began to bleed. Wiping blood from his eyes, he hauled himself back to his feet and, pulling out his phaser, called "Phasers on stun!" Then he circled the couch to confront the Vians. "Since you already know who we are, you must also know that we come in peace. Our prime directive specifically prohibits us from interfering with any…"

The Vians directed their T-bars at the three *Enterprise* men. Their phasers, flying out of their hands, dissolved into air. They tried to reach Gem—and a pulsing, multicolored force field enveloped them.

Thann was stooping over the girl, touching his T-bar to her head. It emitted a chilling whine. They all saw that her white face was transfixed with terror. With a concerted effort, they gathered all their strength to strain against the force field. McCoy was the first to weaken. Then it was Kirk's turn. His head swam, blurring his vision so that everything—the place, Gem, the Vians, his friends' faces, spun wildly in a vertiginous mist.

"Bones… I… can't seem to stand up…"

"Stand still!" McCoy said sharply. "You too, Spock! Don't fight it, don't move! Somehow this field upsets the body metabolism…"

Lai's cold eyes focused on McCoy. "Not quite, Doctor. The field draws its energy *from* your bodies. The more you resist it, the stronger it becomes."

He nodded to Thann, who moved away from Gem. When he lifted his T-bar, the chord sounded. Both Vians disappeared—and the force field collapsed so suddenly that its prisoners fell to the floor.

Kirk gritted his teeth against the pain in his head. "Mr Spock, there must be an exit from this place. See if you can find it."

"Yes, Captain." Tricorder out, Spock moved off to quarter the arena.

"Jim, that's a nasty cut," McCoy said. "Let me have another look at it."

"Don't fuss over me, Bones. They may have hurt the girl." He went to Gem on the couch. "Did they hurt you?" he asked her.

She shook her head. Then, timidly, she touched Kirk's hands. At once pain twisted her face. She drew back; but after a moment, she raised her arm to lay a finger on his throbbing head. To his amazement he saw a cut, identical in size to his own, appear on her forehead. Marveling, he looked at the deep gash. Extending a hand, he touched it gently. It was wet with blood. She took the hand, holding it quietly. And he knew that his wound was gone. At the same instant, hers vanished. Kirk stood up feeling fully refreshed and whole.

McCoy was staring. Kirk nodded. "Yes. The pain is gone. Soon after she touched my head it went."

"And the wound is completely healed! What's more, it fits in, Jim. She must be an *empath!* Her nervous system is so highly responsive, so sensitive that she can actually *feel* others' emotional and physical reactions. They become part of her."

Kirk smiled at Gem. "What does one say for what you've done? My thanks."

"Captain…" It was Spock returning. He pointed to the left. "In that direction my tricorder picked up a substantial collection of objects—electronically sophisticated devices. I fail to understand why the tricorder gave no previous indication of anything out there."

"It's there now, Mr Spock. Let's check it out." They were turning to leave when Kirk looked back at Gem. "Wait a minute." He went to her. "If they find you alone here, it could be dangerous. Will you come with us?"

She nodded, rising from the couch.

Because of the dimness the going was slow. They had to edge past large, contorted rock formations that reared up out of sight. Then, ahead of them, Kirk saw a glimmer of light. As they approached it, the rocks ended and the light grew brilliantly dazzling. It shone down from the ceiling of what seemed to be an enormous laboratory. An odd laboratory. All its complex instrumentation hung in midair.

They spread out to examine it. McCoy, Gem beside him, puzzled over an octagonal, bulb-studded object. Spock had gone straight to the viewing screens; but Kirk, after a cursory glance at a blank panel, was peering into blackness that lay beyond the light's reach. Suddenly glare struck him in the face. It illuminated the lab's dark corner. He backed away, disbelief and horror struggling in his face. "Spock, Bones. *Look!*"

Two large test tubes were suspended from the ceiling. Stuffed into them were the bodies of Linke and Ozaba, their features twisted with agony. The test tubes were labeled. One read "SUBJECT: LINKE." The other said, "SUBJECT: OZABA."

McCoy's voice roused Kirk from his daze. Bones was calling, "Jim! Spock!"

They crossed to him at a run. Wordless, he was pointing to three empty test tubes. The labels they bore read: "McCOY—SPOCK—KIRK."

The chord sounded hollowly in the big room. The *Enterprise* men wheeled. T-bar in hand, Lal was facing them. He eyed their shocked faces disinterestedly. "We are on schedule," he said. "But some further simple tests are necessary."

"We've just seen the results of some of your… tests!" McCoy shouted.

"And I have found our missing men dead." Kirk's voice shook. "Another of your experiments?"

"You are wrong," Lal said. "Their own imperfections killed them. They were not fit subjects. Come, time is short."

"Your time has just about run out!" Kirk cried. "This planet is about to nova. When it does, it will finish itself, you and your whole insane torture chamber along with it! As for your experiments…"

The three exchanged a fast glance. Kirk and McCoy strode toward the Vian. He backed away. As the two circled him, Spock closed in with his Vulcan "neck pinch." Lal collapsed. Spock removed his T-bar control. As he rose from his stoop, the bar in his hand, his tricorder beeped. Lifting it, he said, "Readings indicate passage to the surface lies in that direction, Captain." He gestured to their right.

When the party had left the lab, Lal got to his feet. Thann appeared beside him. They stood silent, their cold eyes fixed on the passageway where the group had vanished.

Spock had found his exit to the surface. Twenty minutes of clambering over rocks had brought them into the open. The red sky was overcast and the stiff wind was blowing harder. Kirk took out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Come in, *Enterprise!*" There was no answer. The Starship was still out of range. Belting the communicator, Kirk saw that Spock was pouring over his tricorder.

"Report, Mr Spock?"

Spock looked up. "The research station is six kilometers from here, Captain. Straight ahead."

"Let's get there as fast as we can. If the ship has a search party looking for us, it will be there." He took Gem's hand; but a blast of wind struck her and she halted, blinded by the whip of sand in her eyes. He made to pick her up in his arms. She shook her head, smiling; and hooking her arm under his, struggled forward again. Fiercely blowing sand became a hazard to them all. Its hard grit hit McCoy's eyes so that he stumbled over a rock that tumbled him head over heels. Spock was hauling him to his feet when Gem rushed from Kirk to help McCoy. He grinned at her reassuringly. "I'm all right," he told her. "Don't worry about me, Gem."

Kirk, shading his eyes, peered ahead through the driving sand. "How much farther?" he asked Spock.

"Just ahead, sir."

McCoy gave a shout. "Jim! Look… Scotty and a search party!"

Before the metal hut, Scott and two Security guards were waving to them. The howl of wind drowned their voices.

"Scotty! Scotty!" Kirk yelled.

He was racing forward when he suddenly realized that Gem had fallen behind. He turned to help—and saw the Vians standing on a rock observing them.

Gem was down, her white face wet with sweat and effort. He picked her up, pushing her after Spock and McCoy. "Keep going!" he cried.

He watched her stumble on. Then, to cover the others' retreat, he ran toward the Vians.

Lal spoke to Thann. "Their will to survive is great."

"They love life greatly to struggle so."

Lal nodded. "The prime ingredient." He pointed a T-bar at the onrushing Kirk; and at once the *Enterprise* Captain felt his strength begin to ebb. Gravity became the enemy—a monstrous leech sucking, sucking at his vitality. Weaving, he reached the foot of the rock where the Vians waited—and fell.

He opened his eyes to see Spock bending over him. Fighting the fatigue that still drained his power, he sat up, crying, "What are you doing here? What happened to Scotty?"

"Mr Scott and the guards were a mirage, Captain."

The Vians' resources seemed as infinite as their will was inexorable. He heard Thann speak his name. He looked up.

"We have decided that one specimen will be sufficient. You will come with us, Captain Kirk."

Kirk got to his feet. "And the others?"

"We have no interest in them," Lal said. "They may go."

McCoy had joined Spock. At the look of relief in Kirk's face, he burst into protest. "You can't go back there! You'll end up like the other two!"

Spock spoke. "Captain, I request permission to be allowed to remain…"

"Denied," Kirk said.

"But, Jim…"

"You have your orders!"

Without a backward look, Kirk started to climb the hillock topped by the rock. Spock, McCoy and Gem moved after him.

The rock was flat as a table. As Kirk walked up to the Vians, Lal said, "You are prepared?"

"Let's get on with it!" Kirk looked into the frigid Vian eyes—and a suspicion chilled him. He turned to check on the others' whereabouts. Spock and McCoy had disappeared. For a moment a hot rage choked him so that he was unable to speak. Then he said, "Where are my friends?"

"They are safe."

"Where are they? You said they'd be released! You said you needed one specimen! *One specimen!* You have it—me! Let the others go!"

Thann nodded to Lal. "Indeed the prime ingredient."

Kirk was shaking. "Never mind the ingredients! Where are my men? Tell me!" The rage broke free. He leaped at Thann. The control bar was lifted. In mid-leap Kirk winked out.

The *Enterprise* was having its troubles. The solar flares had not diminished. A worried Sulu, turning to Scott in Kirk's command chair, said, "Cosmic ray concentration is still above acceptable levels for orbiting the planet, sir."

Scott went to him. "I don't like it, Mr Sulu. Constant exposure to this much radiation could raise the hob with Life Support and our other vital systems."

"Shall I change course to compensate, sir?"

"Not yet." Scott punched the intercom. "Bridge to all sections. We will continue to maintain our present position outside the Minarian star system. Report any sudden increase in radiation levels to the bridge immediately. Medical sections and Life Support will remain on standby alert." Swinging his chair to the helm station, he said," Mr Sulu, estimate how much longer we have until those solar flares subside."

Eyeing his viewer, Sulu moved buttons on his console. "Readings now indicate 2.721 on the Van Allen scale, sir. At the present rate of decrease, we'll have to wait at least seventeen more hours before we can even attempt entering orbit."

Scott nodded glumly. "Aye. Well, as long as we're stuck out here, we might just as well relax and wait till the storm has passed."

"It has already lasted four more hours than we anticipated, sir. Do you think our landing party could be in any danger?"

"Not likely, Mr Sulu. The planet's atmosphere will give them ample protection. If I know Captain Kirk, he's more worried about us than we are about him…"

Kirk had been stripped to the waist. His arms were stretched wide, held in their spread-eagled position by two shackles. He was drenched with sweat. Gem, clinging to a laboratory table, was trembling, her eyes closed.

"All right," he said wearily. "What is it you want to know?"

"We seek no 'information,' as you understand the word. Your civilization is yet too immature to possess knowledge of value to us," Lal said.

Kirk raised his heavy head. "Our knowledge has no value but you're willing to kill to get it! Is that what happened to Linke and Ozaba?"

Thann took a step toward him. "*We* did not kill them! Their own fears did it!"

"Just exactly what did you expect from them? What is it you want from me?"

"We have already observed the intensity of your passions, Captain. We have gauged your capacity to love others. Now we want you to reveal your courage and strength of will."

Kirk's shoulders were going numb. "Why?" he said, his head drooping. He forced it up. "Why, Lal? What do you hope to prove?"

The shackles were too tight. It was their bite into the flesh of his arms that was keeping him conscious. He was glad of the shackles—but tired. Very tired. "If… if my death is going to have any meaning, at least tell me what I am dying for."

Lal lifted his control bar. A flicker of light played over Kirk's swaying body. At the table Gem staggered.

The Vians' transporter had conveyed Spock and McCoy back to the arena. McCoy followed Spock as the Vulcan used his tricorder. "The passage out was there before, Spock! It's got to be there now!"

"I am unable to lock in on the previous readings, Doctor. I can find no exit from here."

A circle of light flared before the couch. It widened, materializing into the forms of Kirk and Gem. His wrists were torn and bleeding; and the swollen veins on his neck were blue. When Spock and McCoy rushed to him, the force field flung them back.

"Jim! What have they done to you?"

Inside the field, Gem had taken Kirk's bleeding hands in hers. Her face and body writhed with his agony. Then red stigmata, identical to his wounds, appeared on her wrists. She backed away and the marks faded. She hesitated, looking at Spock and McCoy.

McCoy stopped straining to reach Kirk. "Help him, Gem. Don't be afraid to help him."

She kept her eyes on them as though the sight of them gave her strength. Again she took Kirk's bleeding wrists—and again her own began to bleed. But this time she ignored both her pain and her wounds. She knelt down on the floor and, cradling Kirk's head on her lap, began to massage his neck and shoulders. Once more there was the strange effect of her touch. His pain visibly eased. Their injuries vanished at the same moment. Gently she laid his head on the floor. Then she slid away from him, too weakened to get to her feet. Kirk reached out a hand to her.

The force field dissolved. Spock and McCoy hurried to them. Still dazed, Kirk struggled to rise. "Gem?" he whispered.

"Lie still!" McCoy said. "I'll check her out right now."

He had to carry her to her couch. Her eyes were closed. McCoy was staring at his medical tricorder, incredulous. The body he'd laid on the couch had been almost transparent, as though entirely drained of life. Now, before his eyes, it was recovering its solidity.

Smiling, Gem looked up at McCoy. He smoothed the soft hair back from her forehead and left her to go to Kirk.

He was sitting up. "Is she all right?"

"She seems fine again."

"Bones, can you explain what happened?"

McCoy spoke excitedly. "Complete empathy—that's what it was! She must be a totally functional Empath! Her nervous system actually connected to yours to counteract the worst of your symptoms. With her strength she virtually sustained your physiological reactions."

"It weakened her," Kirk said. "I could feel it. Does this ability endanger her life?"

"It's impossible to say yet. Supplying life support to you *did* drain her." Spock said, "She was afraid to approach the Captain after the first sharp impact of his pain. It was only your urgent plea, Doctor, that caused her to continue."

"Fear would naturally be the first reaction, Spock." McCoy went to the couch and took Gem's hands. Smiling at her, he said, "She doesn't know our Captain well enough—not yet—to offer up her life for him."

"Could the strain really have killed her?" Kirk persisted.

"I would assume that her instinct for self-preservation would take over to prevent that, Jim." He returned to Kirk. "How do you feel?"

"Tired… just tired."

"Captain, can you recall what happened?"

Kirk spoke slowly. "I'm not sure. I remember the laboratory… there was something they wanted to know. What it was I can't remember." His voice rose. "I wish I could! I can't!"

"Easy does it, Jim. Take it easy."

"What's wrong with me, Bones?"

McCoy studied his tricorder, frowning. "You have all the symptoms of the 'bends.' Nitrogen bubbles in your blood caused the pain. But how did you get the bends down here?"

"You'll have to ask the Vians." Vigor was returning to his voice. "Will I live?"

"You could still use some time in a decompression chamber. Otherwise your recovery is just about miraculous. I wish that I could take the credit for it, but Gem did most of the work."

Spock was examining the control bar he'd taken from Thann. "Captain," he said, "I noted that a circle of light preceded you at the moment you were returned here from the Vians' laboratory."

"Spock, do you have to get so analytical? At a time like this?"

"Bones, Spock is right. Continue, Mr Spock."

"I conclude that such a light is an energy transfer point linking this device to the power source."

"Can you tap into it?"

"If I can determine the frequency at which this device operates I could cause it to function for us."

"And get us out of here the same way they brought us here."

"I would say so, Captain."

"Then get started, Mr Spock."

But the organ chord that invariably heralded some new Vian mischief sounded once more. The two long-robed creatures stood just outside the circle of light that still shone down before Gem's couch.

Lal addressed Kirk. "You are called 'Captain.' You are responsible for the lives of your crew. Is this correct?"

"It is correct," Kirk said.

Thann stepped forward. "We find it necessary to have the cooperation of one of your men in our efforts."

"We will not cooperate," Kirk said.

Lal continued as though he hadn't spoken. "When we resume our interrogations, you will decide which of your men we shall use. There is an 87 percent possibility that the Doctor will die. And though Commander Spock's life is in no danger, the large probability is that he will suffer brain damage resulting in permanent insanity."

They vanished.

Still weakened by his ordeals, Kirk had centered his hopes on Thann's T-bar. He crossed to where Spock was working on it to discover its operating frequency. "How's it coming, Spock?"

"I do not know, Captain. I begin to understand the principles by which it functions—but that is all."

Responsible for the lives of his crew. Lai's definition of *his* function. How to fulfill it? For Bones—probable death in that laboratory. For Spock—derangement of that exquisitely precise organ of his: his mind.

McCoy joined them. “Spock, it won’t be too long before those Vians come back. You’d better find out how that thing works—and soon!”

Kirk gave his own words back to him. “Easy does it, Bones. Take it easy.”

“Men weren’t intended to be this far underground! It’s not natural!”

“And space travel is?” Kirk asked.

Without looking up from his task, Spock said, “I must disagree, Doctor. Witness the men who pass a majority of their lives in mines beneath the surface.”

“I’m a doctor, not a coalminer!”

Now Spock looked up from the T-bar. “Doctor, I have recorded my theories and procedures on the tricorder. Should the Vians return, there is sufficient data for you and the Captain to complete the adjustments.”

McCoy’s anxiety, exploded in irritation. “I’m no mechanic! I couldn’t get that thing to work no matter how many notes you left!”

“Possibly not. But you and the Captain *together* are capable of doing so.”

“In any case, you, Spock, are the *logical* choice to leave with the Captain. I am the man who should go with the Vians.”

Kirk intervened. “The decision is mine! If there are any decisions to be made, *I’ll* make them!” He paused. “If and when it becomes necessary.”

Gem had been listening intently. Wearily Kirk sat down on the couch beside her. The combinations of mental and physical strains had exhausted his last reserves of strength. He rested his head in his hands, shutting his eyes. A hypo hissed against his shoulder. He didn’t move. “What is it, Bones? I don’t need any—”

“I’m still Chief Medical Officer of the *Enterprise*. Would you rather have the bends?… Still dizzy?”

“A little.”

“Lie down until the hypo takes effect. Gem, sit beside him. Watch him.”

Kirk lay down, too tired to argue. As his breathing assumed the quiet regularity of sleep, McCoy nodded his satisfaction and Spock, looking up again from the control bar, said, “How long will he be asleep?”

"Between the emotional drains and that attack of the bends, he's in pretty bad shape, Spock."

"I am not criticizing your action, Doctor. On the contrary, I am grateful for it. The Captain will not be additionally strained by making so difficult a decision. You have simplified the situation considerably."

McCoy looked at him warily. "How?"

"While the Captain is asleep, it is I who am in command. When the Vians return, I shall go with them."

The appalled McCoy looked down at his hypo. "You mean if I hadn't given him that shot…?"

"Precisely. The choice would have been the Captain's. Now it is mine." He bent over the control bar, his face expressionless as ever. McCoy stared at him a moment. Then, returning to Kirk, he checked him over. Satisfied, he replaced the hypo in his medikit. Cursing under his breath, he gave Spock a savage glance. It was noted by Gem, who'd been taking in the argument. She rose now to move noiselessly until she was standing between Kirk and Spock. Kirk stirred restlessly, fighting the unconsciousness of the drug. Spock looked over at him, hesitated, then resumed his work. Gem went to him, touching his shoulder. He didn't look up. She withdrew the hand, looking at it. Then the shining eyes returned to Spock. In her face was a look of wondering love. She had seen past the coldly logical front Spock presented to the world to what the Vulcan officer kept carefully hidden—his love for his Captain and McCoy.

McCoy had seen the look on her face. His own changed abruptly as he came to a decision of his own. Apology in his eyes, he glanced at the impassive Spock, took out his hypo; and crossing to Kirk as though to check him, suddenly whirled—and injected Spock.

Spock stared at him in angry comprehension. "Your actions are highly unethical! My decision stands! I am in command and…" He slumped forward.

McCoy put a hand on his shoulder. "Not this time, Spock," he said softly.

The organ notes sounded. The Vians had returned.

McCoy spoke quickly. "The choice has been made." He extended his hand back to Gem. "You stay with my friends. They will take care of you." He turned. "Do you understand, Gem?"

She looked at him. Thann, exchanging a glance with Lal, said, "Come, then."

McCoy started toward them. Then he looked back toward the sleeping Kirk and Spock. The look was a silent farewell. Tears filled Gem's eyes. They were merciful tears. They dimmed the sight of McCoy as he followed the Vians.

The shackles were stained with Kirk's blood. The Vians had not been content with McCoy's outstretched arms or the threat of his imminent death. They had placed him so as to force his eyes to the empty test tube with his name on it.

A master of the art of suspense, Lal made a speech. "Doctor, please understand that if there were any other way to accomplish our purpose, we should employ it."

McCoy could feel the veins in his neck swelling. "Get on with it!" he told them.

They advanced on him. Thann raised a control bar.

A white-faced Kirk was prowling the arena. "Spock, why… *why* did you let him do it?"

The composed voice said, "I was convinced in the same way you were, Captain—by the good Doctor's hypo." Spock looked up, meeting Kirk's eyes. A message flashed between them. Kirk nodded slightly to their mutual recognition of McCoy's devotion. Then a dissonant chord rang from Spock's control bar. Kirk hurried to him, asking, "Anything, Spock?"

Spock leaned back, regarding the bar with admiration. Extending it to Kirk, he said, "A most unusual device. It is a control unit but *not* a control mechanism. It is, in fact, a mechanical device."

"What exactly is it?"

"The control is attuned to only one pattern of electrical energy—the pattern produced by the mental impulses of the person who possesses it. It is activated solely through mental commands."

"Can it be adapted or… or reattuned to our brain patterns?"

"I am attempting to do so." Spock paused. "However, it is not possible to adjust the control for more than one pattern at a time. As I am most familiar with my own pattern, with your permission, Captain…"

"Do whatever you think best to get it working. What disturbs me is why the Vians have allowed it to remain in our possession."

Spock bent again over the bar. "Understandable, sir. They must know that we are capable of comprehending the control and of making use of it."

"They must know we will use it to escape."

Spock nodded. "The only logical assumption is that they wish to let us go."

"While they still have McCoy?"

"It is evidently their intention, Captain."

Kirk paced the length of the arena. Turning, he looked at Gem. Then slowly he went to her. "Somehow you are the crux… the focal point of all this." He wheeled to Spock. "Even before we got here, she was a prisoner. Yet they haven't hurt her. They haven't even made threats."

"Indeed, Captain, the facts indicate that she is essential to their purpose."

"Yes… there is purpose. *But what is it?*"

Kirk, taking Gem's hands in his, looked intently into the sensitive face, as though it held his answer. "Gem, did those who preceded us die… for you? Has all this… this pain and terror… happened—or been made to happen—for you?"

Spock broke into his concentration. "Completed, Captain. The adjustments are delicate. They may not survive more than one use. Even so, there should be sufficient power to return us to the *Enterprise*."

"Will it take us to McCoy?"

"If you so desire, sir."

Kirk spoke briskly. "The best defense is a strong offense. And I intend to start offending!"

The circle of light still lay before Gem's couch. Kirk stepped into it. Spock followed him. Silently, Gem joined them, McCoy's medikit in her hand. She passed it to Kirk.

He looked at her, his face drawn with anxiety. "Aim for the lab," he said to Spock.

Spock stared down at the bar he held, eyes fixed in concentration. The arena vanished. They were in the lab. Kirk looked around it. Then, stunned, he saw what he had to see.

McCoy hung limply from ropes attached to the ceiling. His features were battered to a pulp. Blood dripped from his open wounds and through the remnants of his uniform.

Kirk broke out of his shocked horror. He ran to the tortured body, supporting its weight in his arms. When Spock had removed

the shackles, they carried it to a table, easing it down gently. Kirk reached for a torn wrist. "The pulse is almost gone." Spock, at the head of the table, was busy with a medical tricorder.

"Spock, what are the readings?"

"Heart, severely damaged; signs of congestion in both lungs; evidence of massive circulatory collapse."

From the corner where she huddled, Gem was watching their every move. In the harsh lab light McCoy's face was colorless, his lips faintly blue. His eyes shuddered open, stared blankly, then focused.

Kirk found water. Raising McCoy's head, he poured some into the smashed lips. "Don't try to talk, Bones." He laid the head back on the table. "Don't try to speak. Don't think. Just take it easy until we can get back to the ship. Don't—"

"Captain…"

Something in Spock's tone caught Kirk's alarmed attention. "What is it? What's the matter?"

With a visible effort Spock looked up from the tricorder. "Captain, I… he's dying. We can make him comfortable but that is all."

"No! You can't be sure, Spock! You're not a doctor."

McCoy whispered, "But… I am. Go on, Spock…"

Spock moved the tricorder over the entire body. "Internal injuries; bleeding in chest and abdomen; hemorrhages of the spleen and liver; 70 percent kidney failure…"

"He's right, Jim." McCoy grinned weakly. "Being a doctor has its drawbacks… I've always wondered—" A bout of coughing silenced him. Kirk supported his head until it passed. Then he tore a piece from McCoy's mangled shirt. Dipping it in the water, he dampened the hot forehead.

"Thanks… Jim…"

Kirk, his face suddenly appearing ten years older, looked at Spock. "How long?"

Spock hesitated; but at McCoy's faint nod, he said, "It could happen at any time, Captain."

The broken mouth moved in a smile. "The correct medical phrase, eh, Spock?" Coughing assailed him again, this time so violently that he seemed unable to breathe. It ceased abruptly, leaving him motionless.

"Doctor!" Spock felt for the neck pulse. He found it. Straightening, he rested his hand briefly on McCoy's head. McCoy

opened his eyes, met Spock's—and their unspoken loyalty was wordlessly spoken. Then a spasm of pain twisted McCoy's face. He writhed on the table, coughing. The fit lasted so long that it suffocated him.

"Can't we do something?" Kirk said.

"I'm afraid not, Captain." As Spock spoke, McCoy lost consciousness.

Kirk said, "Gem!" They both turned toward her. "Gem could help him!" Kirk cried. "As she helped me!"

She was cowering in her corner. At the sight of her overwhelming fear, Kirk hesitated. "Could his nearness to death also kill her?"

"The Doctor's analysis of her life-support reactions assumed that the instinct for self-preservation would prevent that. However, he could not be positive."

"If she could just strengthen him to keep him from sinking further into death, we could take over, Spock, with Bones directing us."

They had started toward her when the chord suddenly reverberated at full power. The force field encircled them.

The Vians' arms were lifted in nameless threat. Lai's T-bar was extended downward. "No interference will be permitted!" he said.

Imprisoned, Kirk spoke from within the field. He was openly pleading. "She can save his life! Let us help her go to him!"

"She must neither be forced nor urged to take action."

"All must proceed without interference," Thann added.

"The purpose that brought us together—" Lal began.

"What purpose?" Kirk shouted. "What purpose can any of this serve except the satisfaction of some sick need of yours?"

"We have but one need left in life," Lai said. "It is to see the completion of the final moment of our test."

"Be patient," Thann urged.

"Patient!" Kirk's scorn was fierce with fury. "Our friend is dying!"

"Perhaps," Thann said.

"What purpose will our friend's death serve other than your pleasure in it?" Spock's voice had never been so toneless. "Surely beings as advanced as you know that your solar system will soon be extinct. This star of yours will nova."

"We know," Thann said.

"Then you know that the many millions of inhabitants on its planets are doomed."

The chill voice of Lal said, "That's why we are here."

Kirk swept the laboratory with a gesture. "This place of death you have devised for your pleasure—will it prevent that catastrophe?"

"No, it will not. That is true. But it may save Gem's planet. Of all the planets of Minara, we are empowered to transport to safety only the inhabitants of one." Thann's eyes fixed on Kirk's. "If Gem's planet is the sole one to be saved, we must make certain beyond all doubt that its people are worthy of survival."

"And how will that be served by the death of our friend?"

Lal answered. "His death will not serve it. Only Gem's willingness to give her life for him will. You were her teachers."

"Her teachers? What did she learn from us?"

"Your will to survive; your love of life; your passion to know. These qualities are recorded in her being." He paused. "Each one of you has been ready to give his life for the others. We must now find out whether that instinct has been transmitted to Gem."

The laboratory equipment rattled. The earth rumbled under the pressures of another quake. Thann spoke to Lal. "Time is growing short."

Spock looked down at McCoy's ravaged face. "You were correct, Captain. Everything that has occurred here has been caused to happen by them. This place has been a great laboratory and we have been the subjects of a test."

"No!" Thann said. "Only the circumstances were created by us. They were necessary."

Lal stepped toward Kirk. "Your actions have been spontaneous. What is truest and best in any species of beings has been revealed by you. Yours are the qualities that make a civilization worthy to survive. We are grateful to you."

"Look!" Thann cried.

Gem had left her corner. She moved to McCoy, passing through the force field as though it didn't exist. She passed her hands gently over the wounds on his face and body. Staring at her, hope returned to the *Enterprise* men.

Thann turned to Lal. "This is most significant. An instinct new to the essence of her being is generating. We are seeing it come to birth…"

Lal nodded. "Compassion for another is becoming part of her functioning life system."

The fearful injuries on McCoy's face were transferring themselves to Gem's. His eyes fluttered open, their pupils still glazed. Tensely, Kirk watched for some body movement. It didn't come. But the wounds on his face had begun to heal; and those on Gem's were disappearing. McCoy moved his head. Looking at Gem, recognition replaced the glaze in his eyes.

She was growing weak. Fear came into her great eyes. She withdrew from the table and staggered back toward her corner. McCoy's wounds began to bleed again.

"She is saving herself," Lal said. "She does not yet possess the instinct to save her people."

"We have failed," Thann said.

Spock spoke to Kirk. "Captain, the Doctor's life is not solely dependent on Gem. The Vians also must have the power to give him back his life."

Lal addressed Spock directly. "Your friend's death is not important. We must wait to see whether her instinct for self-sacrifice has become stronger than her instinct for self-preservation."

Watching, Kirk could see signs of the anguished internal struggle in the girl. Then her white face cleared with decision. She returned to McCoy, her step firm and determined. Kneeling beside the table, she took his limp hands in hers. Again, his wrists' gashes transferred to hers. McCoy's body moved—but life once again seemed to be draining from her.

McCoy lifted his head. "Don't touch me," he told her. "Stay away."

He tried to look around. "Jim… Spock… are you here?"

"Yes, Bones."

"Don't let her touch me. She will die."

He hauled himself to his knees, struggling to pull his hands from Gem's. The effort exhausted him. He fell back, looking pleadingly at Kirk. "Make her leave me… Jim… Spock… I will not destroy life. Not even to save my own. You know that. Please… make her leave me."

Gem placed her hand on his heart. Color, faint but visible, came into McCoy's face.

"Captain!"

"Yes, Spock."

"The intensity of emotion that is exhausting us is building up the force field around us!"

"I know. It draws its energy from us."

"In spite of what we see, sir, all emotions must be eliminated. This may weaken the field."

"I'll try, Spock."

Both closed their eyes. A complete calm was in Spock's face. Even concentration was absorbed by his serenity. His hand went through the force field. He moved through it and quietly approached the Vians. Still held by the field, Kirk tried to still his tumult of anxieties. He looked at the Vians. They were so tense with their will to power that they failed to note Spock's position behind them. The Vulcan's arm rose; and lashed down in a judo chop that sent Lai's T-bar flying. The force field broke. As Kirk raced out of it, Spock retrieved the T-bar. Physically helpless now, the Vians hesitated, their essential test threatened with final disaster.

Gem was swaying with increasing weakness. McCoy dragged himself to his knees, crying, "No! No! I won't let you do it!" He shoved her away in a momentary influx of strength. Frightened by his sudden violence, she shrank from the table. As McCoy tried to move further away from her, his wounds reopened. He fell back, lying still. Gem stumbled back to her corner.

Kirk took the T-bar from Spock. He was rushing to McCoy with it when Lal spoke. "You cannot use our powers to change what is happening."

Kirk looked at the deathly white face on the table. Then he went to the Vians. "You must save the life of our friend."

"No. We will not," Lal said. "Her instinct must develop to the full. The test must be complete."

"It is complete." Spock joined Kirk. "Gem has already earned the right of survival for her planet. She has offered her life."

"To offer is insufficient proof," Lal said.

"If death is the only proof you can understand, then here are four lives for you." Kirk proffered the T-bar to Lal.

The Vian stared at him. "We will not leave our friend," Kirk said.

Lal took the bar. Turning, the two *Enterprise* officers strode back to McCoy.

At the table, Kirk faced around. "You are frauds," he said. "You have lost the capacity to feel the very emotions you brought Gem

here to experience! You don't know the meaning of life. Compassionate love is dead in you! All you are is arid intellect!"

Lal's face went rigid with shock. Thann began to tremble. Their very bodies seemed to dwindle as Kirk's words struck home. They looked at each other, lost, the values of their lifetime dissolving. Lal was the first to move. Thann followed him to the table. They stood there a long moment, looking down at McCoy. Then Lal passed the T-bar over him. McCoy sat up, whole.

Nobody spoke. The Vians went to Gem. They lifted her in their arms. With her head on his shoulder, Lal turned, the first glint of warmth in his aged face. "The one emotion left to us is gratitude," he said. "We are thankful that we can express it to you. Farewell."

They chose to vanish slowly, changing into mist. Gem, looking back at the *Enterprise* trio, was the last to disappear.

The bridge viewing screen held the images of the immortal stars. Kirk turned away from it. Among them was a mortal star about to die.

"Strange…" he said.

Beside him, Spock said, "What puzzles you, Captain?"

"Puzzled isn't the word, Mr Spock. I think I am awed."

"I'm with you, Jim," McCoy said. "She awed me."

"I wasn't thinking of Gem," Kirk said. He looked back at the viewing screen. "I was thinking of the fantastic element of chance that out in limitless space we should have come together with the savior of a planet."

Spock said, "The element of chance, Captain, can virtually be eliminated by a civilization as advanced as the Vians'."

Scott spoke from his station. "Not to dispute your computer, Mr Spock—but from the little you have told me, I would say she was a pearl of great price."

"What, Scotty?"

"You know the story of the merchant… that merchant 'who when he found one pearl of great price, went and sold all he had and bought it.'"

"She was that all right, Scotty," Kirk said. "And whether the Vians bought her or found her, I am glad for her and the planet she will save."

"Personally," McCoy said, "I find it *fascinating* that with all their scientific knowledge and advances, it was good old-fashioned

human emotion they valued the most."

"Perhaps the Vulcans should hear about this," said Scott.

"Mr Spock, could you be prevailed upon to give them the news?"

Spock looked at them blandly. "Possibly, Captain. I shall certainly give the thought its due consideration."

"I am sure you will, Mr Spock." Kirk turned to Sulu. "Helmsman, take us out of orbit. Warp factor two."

At high speed the *Enterprise* left the area of the dying star.

THE THOLIAN WEB

(Judy Burns and Chet Richards)

The bridge was at full muster—Kirk, Scott, Spock, Uhura, Chekov, Sulu—and extremely tense. The *Enterprise* was in unsurveyed territory, approaching the last reported position of the Starship *Defiant,* which had vanished without a trace three weeks ago.

"Captain," Spock said, "I have lost the use of all sensors. Were I to believe these readings, space itself is breaking up around us."

"A major failure?"

"Not in the sensors, sir; I have run a complete systems check. The failure is mine; I simply do not know how to interpret these reports."

"Captain," Scott added, "there may be no connection, but we're losing power in the warp engines."

"How bad is it?"

"We can hardly feel it now, but it's richt abnormal all the same. I canna find the cause."

Now it was Chekov's turn. "Captain, we have visual detection of an object dead ahead. It *looks* like a star-ship."

It did, at that, but not a starship in any condition to which they were accustomed. It was visibly shimmering.

"Mr Spock, what's wrong with it?"

"Nonexistence, to put the matter in a word, Captain. There is virtually no radar return, mass analysis, radiation traces. We see it, but the sensors indicate it isn't there."

"Mr Chekov, narrow the field and see if you can bring up the identification numbers. It's the *Defiant,* all right. Mr Sulu, impulse engines only. Close to Transporter range. Lieutenant Uhura, open a hailing channel."

"I've been trying to raise them, sir, but there's no response."

Chekov shifted the viewing angle again. The other ship showed no gaping holes or other signs of damage. It was just ghostly—and silent.

"Within Transporter range, sir."

"Thanks, Mr Sulu. Lieutenant, order Dr McCoy to the Transporter Room. Mr Spock, Mr Chekov, I'll want you as well. Environment suits all around; O'Neil to handle the Transporter. Take over, Mr Scott."

The Transporter was locked onto the bridge of the *Defiant.* The lighting there turned out to be extremely subdued; even some monitor lights were not functioning. But the situation was all too visible, nonetheless.

A man somewhat older than Kirk, wearing a captain's stripes, lay dead in his command chair, a number one phaser clutched in one hand. The other hand was twisted in the hair of a junior officer. The junior was also dead, with both his hands locked around the Captain's neck.

Chekov was the first to speak. "Has there ever been a mutiny on a starship before?"

"Technically," Spock said, "the refusal of Captain Garth's fleet to follow his orders when he became insane was a mutiny. But there has never been any record of an occurrence like this."

McCoy stopped to examine the bodies. "The Captain's neck is broken, Jim."

"This ship is still functioning," Spock said after a quick check of the communications console. "It is logical to assume that the mutineers are somewhere aboard. Yet the sensors show no sign of life anywhere in the vessel."

"Odd," Kirk said reflectively. "Very odd. Spock, you stay here with me. Chekov, get down to Life Support and Engineering. Dr McCoy, check out sickbay. I want some answers."

The two men moved off. As they did so, Scott's voice sounded in Kirk's helmet. "Captain, Mr Sulu reports that he can't get an accurate fix on the *Defiant,* but it seems to be drifting away. Should he correct for range?"

Still odder. How could one ship be moving relative to the other when neither was under power?"Keep us within beaming range, but not too close."

"Chekov reporting, Captain. All dead in Life Support and in Engineering as well."

"Right. Get back up here. Bones?"

"More bodies, Jim. Proximate cause of deaths, various forms of violence. In short, I'd say they killed each other."

"Could a mental disease possibly have inflicted all of the crew at once?"

"It may still be here, sir," Chekov said, reappearing. "I feel pretty funny myself—headachy, dizzy."

"I can't answer the question," McCoy's voice said. "According to the medical log, even the ship's surgeon here didn't really know what was going on. The best I can do for you is take all the readings I can get and analyze them later. Now what the devil…?"

"Bones! What's happening?"

There was a brief silence. Then: "Jim, this ship's beginning to dissolve! I just put my hand right *through* a corpse—and then through the wall next to him."

"Get back up here on the double. Kirk to *Enterprise.* Mr Scott, stand by to beam us back."

"Captain, I can't. Not all at once, at least."

"What do you mean? What's going on over there?"

"Nothing we can understand," Scott's voice said grimly. "The *Defiant* is fading out, and it's—well, something is ripping the innards out of our own ship. It's jamming our Transporter frequencies. We've got only three working, and I can't be sure about those. One of you has got to wait."

"Request permission to remain," Spock said. "I could be completing the data."

"It's more important to get what you already have into analysis on the *Enterprise.* Don't argue. I'll probably be right after you."

But he was not. Within moments after Spock, Chekov and McCoy materialized aboard the *Enterprise,* the *Defiant* had vanished.

Scott was at the consoles with the Transporter officer. Spock joined them, removing his helmet, and scanned the board.

"See anything I don't?" Scott said.

"Apparently not. Everything is negative."

McCoy took off his own helmet. "But he's got to be out there somewhere. If the Transporter won't grab him, what about the shuttlecraft? There must be some way to pick him up."

"There is no present trace of the Captain, Doctor," Spock said evenly. "The only next possible action is to feed the computer our data and see what conclusions can be drawn."

The computer was the fastest of its kind, but the wait seemed frustratingly long all the same. At last its pleasantly feminine voice said: "Integrated."

"Compute the next period of spatial interphase," Spock told it.

"Two hours, twelve minutes."

Spock shut the machine off. Scott was staring at him, aghast. "Is that how long we have to wait before we can pick up the Captain? But, Spock, I don't think I can hold the ship in place that long. The power leak is unbalanced and I haven't been able to trace it, let alone stop it."

"You will have to keep trying," Spock said. "The fabric of space is very weak here. If we disturb it, there will be no chance of retrieving the Captain alive."

Chekov was looking baffled; worse, he was looking positively ill. "I don't understand," he said. "What's so special about this region of space?"

"I can only speculate," Spock said. "We exist in a universe which coexists with a multitude of others in the same physical space, but displaced in time. For certain brief periods, one area of such a space overlaps an area of ours. That is the time of interphase when we connect with the *Defiant's* universe."

"And retrieve the Captain," Uhura added.

"Perhaps. But the dimensional structure of each universe is totally dissimilar to the others. Any use of power would disturb what can at best be only a tenuous and brief connection. It might also result in our being trapped ourselves…"

"And die like them?" Chekov said raggedly. Suddenly his voice rose to a yell. "Damn you, Spock…"

He sprang. Spock, surprised, was knocked backward, Chekov's hands around his neck. Sulu attempted to drag Chekov off; the enraged man struck out at him. Scott promptly grabbed him by that arm. It was all that they could do to handle him, but the distraction enabled Spock to get in a neck pinch.

"Security guards to the bridge," Spock said to the intercom. "Dr McCoy, will you also please report?"

McCoy appeared almost at once, taking in the scene at a glance. "He jumped you? My fault, I should have checked him the minute he said he was feeling funny, but there was so much else going on. Anybody notice any spasms of pain? Ah. What about his behavior? Hysterical? Frightened?"

"He looked more angry than frightened to me," Uhura said. "But there was nothing to be angry about."

"Nevertheless," Spock said, "there were all the signs of a murderous fury. After what we have seen aboard the *Defiant,* the episode is doubly disturbing."

"I'll say it is," McCoy said. "Guards, take him to sickbay. I'll see what I can find out from seeing the thing in its first stages. Spock, on the other subject, what makes you think Captain Kirk is still alive?"

"The Captain was locked in the Transporter beam when the *Defiant* phased out, Doctor. It is possible that he was saved the shock of transition. If we do not catch him again at the precise corresponding instant in the next interphase, he will die. There is no margin for error; his environmental unit can supply breathable air for no more than another three point twenty-six hours."

"Mr Spock," Sulu called from the helm. "A vessel is approaching on an intercept vector."

Spock walked quickly to the command chair, and Scott went back to his post. "Status, Mr Sulu," Spock said.

"Range, two hundred thousand kilometers and closing. Relative velocity, zero point five one C."

"Red alert," Spock said. The klaxon began to sound throughout the ship. At the same instant, Uhura captured the intruder on the main viewing screen.

The stranger was crystalline in appearance, blue-green in coloration, and shaped like a tetrahedron within which a soft light seemed to pulsate. As the scene materialized, Sulu gasped.

"Stopped dead, Mr Spock. Now, how do they do that? Range, ninety thousand kilometers and holding."

"Mr Spock," Uhura said. "I'm getting a visual signal from them."

"Transfer it to die main viewer."

The scene dissolved into what might have been the command bridge of the alien vessel. Most of the frame, however, was occupied by the upper half of an unknown creature. Like its vessel, the alien was almost jewel-like in appearance, multifaceted, crystalline, though it was humanoid in build. A light pulsated rapidly but irregularly inside what seemed to be its head.

"I am Commander Loskene," the creature said at once in good Federation Interlingua. "You are trespassing in a territorial annex of the Tholian Assembly. You must leave this area immediately."

Spock studied Loskene. The pulsating light did not seem to be in synch with the voice. He said formally, "Spock, in command of the Federation Starship *Enterprise.* Commander, the Federation regards this area as free space."

"We have claimed it. And we are prepared to use force, if necessary, to hold it."

"We are not interested in a show of force. The *Enterprise* has responded to a distress call from one of our ships and is currently engaged in rescue operations. Do you wish to assist us?"

"I find no evidence of a disabled ship. My instruments indicate that ours are the only two vessels in this area."

"The other ship is trapped in an interspatial sink. It should reappear in one hour and fifty minutes. We request that you stand by until then."

"Very well, *Enterprise.* In the interest of interstellar amity, we will wait. But we will not tolerate deceit."

The view wavered, and then the screen once more showed the Tholian ship. Now there was nothing to do but wait—and hope.

The moment of interphase approached at last. As before, Scott personally took over the Transporter console. In the command chair, Spock watched the clock intently.

"Transporter Room."

"Aye, Mr Spock. I'm locked onto the Captain's coordinates."

"Interphase in twenty seconds… ten seconds… five, four, three, two, one, energize!"

There was a tense silence. Then Scott's voice said, "The platform's empty, Mr Spock. There's naught at all at those coordinates.'

"Any abnormality to report, Mr Sulu?"

"The sensor readings don't correspond to those we received the last time we saw the *Defiant.* Insofar as I can tell, the Tholian entry into the area has disturbed the interphase."

"McCoy to bridge," said the intercom. "Has the Captain been beamed aboard, Mr Spock?"

"No, Doctor. And the interphase period has been passed. We will have to wait for the next one."

"But he hasn't got enough air for that! And there's been another case like Chekov's. I have had to confine my orderly to sickbay."

"Have you still no clues as to the cause, Doctor?"

"I know exactly what the cause is," McCoy's voice said grimly. "And there's nothing I can do to stop it. The molecular structure of the central nervous system, including the brain, is being distorted

by the space we are in. Sooner or later the whole crew will be affected—unless you get the *Enterprise* out of here."

"Mr Spock!" Sulu broke in. "We're being fired upon!"

The announcement came only seconds before the bolt itself struck. The *Enterprise* lurched, but did not roll.

"Damage control, report," Spock said.

"Minor structural damage to sections A-4 and C-13."

"Engineering, hold power steady. Mr Sulu, divert all but emergency maintenance power into the shields."

"Sir," Sulu said, "that will reduce phaser power by fifty percent."

Almost as if it had heard him, the Tholian ship darted forward. It seemed to be almost within touching distance before it fired again. This time, the shock threw everybody who was not seated to the floor.

"Engineering to bridge. Mr Spock, we can't take another like that. Well either have to fight or run."

"Mr Sulu, lock in phaser tracking controls. Divert power to the phaser banks and fire at the next close approach. Lieutenant Uhura, open a channel to the Tholians."

McCoy came onto the bridge, his face masklike. On the main viewing screen, the pyramidal ship looped around and began another run.

"Spock, what's the use of this battle?" McCoy demanded. "You've already lost the Captain. Take the ship out of here."

Spock, intent upon the screen, did not answer. The pyramid zigzagged in. Then both vessels fired at once.

The *Enterprise* rang like a gong and the lights flickered, but the screen showed that the Tholian, too, had sustained a direct hit. There was no visible damage, but the pyramid had again stopped dead, and then began to retreat.

"A standoff," Spock said. "Mr Scott, status?"

"Converters burned out," Scott's voice said. "We've lost drive and hence the ability to correct drift. I estimate four hours in replacement time."

"By that time," Sulu said, "well have drifted right through that—that gateway out there."

"Are you satisfied?" McCoy said, picking himself up off the deck. "Spock, why did you do it?"

"To stay in the area for the next interphase," Spock said, "required for disabling the Tholian ship."

"But you're ignoring the mental effects! How can you risk your whole crew on the dim chance of rescuing one officer—one presumed dead, at that? The Captain wouldn't have done that!"

"Doctor, I hardly believe that now is the time for such comparisons. Get down to your laboratory at once and search for an antidote to the mental effects. Since we must remain here, that is your immediate task. Mine is to command the *Enterprise.*"

McCoy left, though not without an angry glare.

"Mr Spock, something has just entered sensor range,"

Sulu said. "Yes, it's another Tholian ship. Loskene must have contacted them at the same time they intercepted us. Loskene is moving back out of phaser range."

"Lieutenant, attempt contact again."

"No response, sir."

On the screen, the two Tholian ships joined—literally joined, base to base, making what seemed to be a single vessel like a six-sided diamond. Then they began to separate again. Between their previously common bases a multicolored strand stretched out across space.

Spock rose and went to the library computer station. The Tholians met again, separated, spinning another thread. Then another. Gradually, a latticework of energy seemed to be growing.

"Switch scanners, Mr Sulu."

The screen angle changed. The tempo of the Tholian activity was speeding up rapidly. From this point of view, it seemed that the *Enterprise* was already almost a third surrounded by the web and it kept on growing.

Spock pulled his head out of the hooded viewer. "Fascinating," he said.. "And very efficient. If they succeed in completing that structure before we are repaired, we shall not be able to run even if we wished to."

Nobody replied. There seemed to be nothing to say.

There was a service for Kirk. It was brief and military. Spock, as the next in command, spoke the eulogy. The speech was not long, but it was interrupted all the same, by another seizure of madness striking down a crewman in the congregation. Afterward, the tension seemed much greater.

As the rest filed out, McCoy stopped Spock at the doorway. "There is a duty to be performed in the Captain's cabin," he said.

"It requires both of us."

"Then it will have to wait. My duties require my immediate return to the bridge."

"The Captain left a message tape," the surgeon said. "It was his order that it be reviewed by both of us should he ever be declared dead—as you have just done."

"It will have to wait for a more suitable moment," Spock said, putting his hand on the corridor rail.

"Why? Are you afraid it will change your present status?"

Spock turned sharply. "The mental and physical state of this crew are your responsibility, Doctor. As I have observed before, command is mine."

"Not while a last order remains to be obeyed."

For a moment Spock did not reply. Then he said, "Very well. To the Captain's quarters, then."

McCoy had evidently visited Kirk's quarters before the service, for laid out on a table was the black velvet case which contained Kirk's medals, and it was open. The surgeon looked down at them for a long moment.

"He was a hero in every sense of the word," he said. "Yet his life was sacrificed for nothing. The one thing that would have given his death meaning is the survival of the *Enterprise.* You have made that impossible."

Spock said glacially, "We came here for a specific purpose."

"Maybe not the same one. I came to find out, among other things, really why you stayed and fought."

Spock closed the box. "The Captain would have remained to recover a man at the risk of his own life, other things being equal. I do not consider the question closed."

"He wouldn't have risked the ship. And what do you mean, the question isn't closed? Do you think he may be still alive after all? Then why did you declare him dead—to assure your own captaincy?"

"Unnecessary. I am already in command of the *Enterprise.*"

"It's a situation I wish I could remedy."

"If you believe," Spock said, "that I remained just to fire that phaser and kill James Kirk or this crew, it is your prerogative as Medical Officer of this ship to relieve me or duty. In the meantime, I suggest that we play the tape you referred to, so I can get back to the bridge and you can resume looking for an antidote for the madness."

"All right." McCoy turned to Kirk's viewer and flipped a switch. The screen lit; in it, Kirk was seated at his desk.

"Spock. Bones," Kirk's voice said. "Since you are playing this tape, we will assume that I am dead, the tactical situation is critical and you two are locked in mortal combat.

"It means also, Spock, that you have control of my ship and are probably making the most difficult decisions of your career. I can offer only one small piece of advice, for what it's worth. Use every scrap of knowledge and logic you've got to save the ship, but temper your judgment with intuitive insight. I believe you have that quality. But if you can't find it in yourself, then seek out McCoy. Ask his advice. And if you find it sound, take it.

"Bones, you heard what I just told Spock. Help him if you can, but remember that *he* is the Captain. His decisions, when he reaches them, are to be obeyed without further question. You might find that he is capable of both human insight and human error, and they are the most difficult to defend. But you will find that Spock is deserving of the same loyalty and confidence that you all have given me.

"As to the disposal of my personal effects…"

McCoy snapped the switch, and turned. For a moment the two men studied each other, less guardedly than before. Then McCoy said, "Spock, I'm sorry. It hurts, doesn't it?"

Spock closed his eyes for a moment. Then he turned and left. McCoy remained for a moment longer, thoughtful, and then stepped out into the corridor.

He was greeted by a stifled scream. Turning, he saw Uhura running toward him, half out of uniform, her normally unshakable calm dissolved in something very close to panic. She saw McCoy and stopped, gasping, trying to get words out; but before they could form, a stab of pain seemed to go through her and her knees buckled. She grabbed the rail for support.

The signs were all too clear. McCoy surreptitiously got out his hypospray, and then went to steady her.

"Lieutenant!" he said sharply. "What is it?"

"I—Doctor, I've just seen the Captain!"

"Yes, he just left a moment ago."

"No, I don't mean Mr Spock. The captain. He's alive!"

"I'm afraid not. But of course you saw him. We would all like to see him."

Her legs were still shaking, but she seemed somewhat calmer now. "I know what you're thinking. But it isn't that. I was looking into my mirror in my quarters, and there he was. He was—sort of shimmering, like the *Defiant* was when we first saw it. He looked puzzled—and like he was trying to tell me something."

McCoy brought the hypospray up. Uhura saw it and tried to fight free, but she was too wobbly to resist. "I did see him. Tell Mr Spock. He's alive, he's alive…"

The hypospray hissed. "I'll tell him," McCoy said gently. "But in the meantime, you're going to sickbay."

One of Scott's crewmen attacked him within the same hour. The effect was spreading faster through the ship. The Tholian web was now two-thirds complete, and the *Enterprise* was still without impulse drive, let alone the thrust to achieve interstellar velocity.

The crewman's attack failed; but a shaken Scott was on the bridge not ten minutes later.

"Mr Spock—I've just seen the Captain."

"Spock to McCoy; please come to the bridge. Go on, Mr Scott."

"He was on the upper engineering level—sparkling, rather like a Transporter effect. He seemed to be almost floating. And I think he saw us. He seemed to be breathing pretty heavily—and then, hey presto! he winked right out."

The elevator doors snapped open and McCoy came out, fast enough to pick up most of Scott's account. He said, "Scotty, are you feeling all right?"

"Och, I think so. Tired, maybe."

"So are we all, of course. Don't fail to see me if you have any other symptoms."

"Right."

"Lieutenant Uhura told a similar story before she went under," Spock said. "Perhaps we ought not to discount it entirely. Yet in critical moments, men sometimes see exactly what they want to see, even when they are not ill"

"Are you suggesting," McCoy said, "that the men are seeing the Captain because they've lost confidence in you?"

"I am making no suggestions, but merely stating a fact."

"Well, the situation is critical, all right. And there have been more assaults on the lower decks. And if Scottie here's being

affected, that will finish whatever chance we have to get the *Enterprise* out of here."

"Have you any further leads on a remedy?"

"A small one," McCoy said. "I've been toying with the idea of trying a chlortheragen derivative. But I'm not ready to try anything so drastic, yet."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing…"

"Gentlemen," Scott said quietly. "Mr Spock. Look behind you."

At the same moment, there was a chorus of gasps from the rest of the personnel on the bridge. Spock turned.

Floating behind him was an image of Captain Kirk, full length, but soapily iridescent. He seemed to recognize Spock, but to be unable to move. Kirk's hand rose to his throat, and his lips moved. There was no sound.

Spock—hurry!

The figure vanished.

The Tholian web continued to go up around the *Enterprise,* section by section. The pace had slowed somewhat; Loskene and his compatriots seemed to have concluded that the *Enterprise* would not or could not leave the area.

Aboard the ship, too, the tension seemed to have abated, if only slightly. It was now tacitly accepted that the apparition of the Captain on the bridge had not been a part of the lurking madness, and that he had been, therefore, alive then.

Spock and Scott were having another computer session.

"So your reluctance to use the phasers now stands endorsed," the Engineering Officer said. "They blasted a hole right through this crazy space fabric and sent the *Defiant* heaven only knows where."

"And would have sent the Captain with it, if we. had not had a Transporter lock on him during the first fade-out. As of now, only the overlap time has changed; the next interphase will be early, in exactly twenty minutes. Can you be ready?"

"Aye," Scott said, "she'll be back together, but we'll have only eighty percent power built up."

"It will have to do."

McCoy came up behind them, carrying a tray bearing a flask and three glasses. "Compliments of the house, gentlemen," he said. "To your good health and the health of your crew. Drink it down!"

"What is it?" Spock said.

"Generally, it's an antidote-cum-preventive for the paranoid reaction. Specifically, a derivative of chlortheragen."

"If I remember aright," Scott said, "that's a nerve gas used by the Klingons. Are you trying to kill us all, McCoy?"

"I said it was a derivative, not the pure stuff. In this form it simply deadens certain nerve inputs to the brain."

"Any good brand of Scotch will do that for you."

"As a matter of fact," McCoy said, "it works best mixed with alcohol. But it does work. It even brought Chekov around, and he's been affected the longest of any of us."

Scott knocked his drink back, and made a face. "It'll nae become a regular tipple with me," he said. "I'll be getting back to my machines."

Spock nodded after him and crossed to the command chair. A moment later Chekov himself entered, beaming, and took his regular position. Uhura was already at her post, as was Sulu.

"Your absence was keenly felt, Ensign," Spock said. To begin with, give me an estimated time for completion of the Tholian tractor field."

"At the enemy's present pace, two minutes, sir."

"Mr Sulu, I have the computers programmed to move us through the interspatial gateway. Stand ready to resume the helm as soon as we emerge on the other side—wherever that may be."

"Transporter Room."

"Scott here."

"Ready for interphase in seventy-five seconds."

"Aye, sir, standing by."

"Mr Spock," Sulu said, "the Tholians are getting ready to close the web. It seems to be contracting to fit the ship."

"Counting down to interphase," Chekov said. He now had an open line to the Transporter Room. "One minute."

"Mr Scott, have we full power?"

"Only seventy-six percent, Mr Spock."

"Can the computer call on it all at once?"

"Aye, I think she'll stand it."

"Thirty seconds."

Suddenly, on the viewing screen, between the *Enterprise,* a tiny figure in an environmental suit popped into being.

"I see him!"

"He's early!"

"It's the Captain!"

The webbing began to slide across the screen in a heavy mesh. Behind it, stars slid past as well.

"Tractor field activated," Sulu said. "We're being pulled out of here."

"Try to maintain position, Mr Sulu."

The ship throbbed to the sudden application of power at the computer's command. Heavy tremors shook the deck.

The web vanished.

"We broke it!" Chekov cheered.

"No, Ensign, we went out through the interdimensional gateway. Since we went through shortly after interphase, we should still be in some part of normal space. Compute the distance from our original position."

"Umm—two point seventy-two parsecs." Chekov looked aghast. "But that's beyond Transporter range!"

"You forget, Mr Chekov, that we have a shortcut. Mr Scott, are you still locked on the Captain?"

"Aye, sir, though I dinna understand how."

"You can beam him in now—we have broken free."

"Aye, sir—got him! But he's unconscious. McCoy, this is your department."

"I will be down directly," Spock said. "Mr Sulu, take over."

As it turned out, no elaborate treatment was needed; taking Kirk's helmet off to let him breathe ship's air removed the source of the difficulty, and once he had been moved to his quarters, an epinephrine hypospray brought him quickly to consciousness. For a moment he looked up at Spock and McCoy in silence. Then McCoy said, "Welcome home, Jim."

"Thanks, Bones. You know, I had a whole universe to myself after the *Defiant* was thrown out. There was absolutely no one else in it. Somehow I could sense it."

"That must have been disorienting," McCoy observed.

"Very. I kept trying to get through to the ship. I think I did at least three times, but it never lasted. I must say I like a crowded

universe much better. How did you two get along without me?"

"We managed," McCoy said. "Spock gave the orders. I found the answers."

Spock gave McCoy a curious glance, but nodded confirmation.

"You mean you didn't have any problems?" Kirk said, with slight but visible incredulity.

"None worth reporting, Captain," Spock said.

"Let me be the judge of that."

"Only such minor disturbances, Captain, as are inevitable when humans are involved."

"Or are involved with Vulcans," McCoy added.

"Understood, gentlemen. I hope my last orders were helpful in solving the problems not worth reporting."

"Orders, Captain?" Spock said.

"The orders I left for you—for both of you—on tape."

"Oh, those orders!" said McCoy. "There wasn't time, Captain. We never got a chance to listen to them."

"The crisis was upon us and then passed so quickly, Captain, that…"

I see," Kirk said, smiling. "Nothing worth reporting happened, and it all happened so quickly. Good. Well, let's hope there will be no similar opportunity to test those orders that you never heard. Let's get to work."

FOR THE WORLD IS HOLLOW AND I HAVE TOUCHED THE SKY

(Rik Vollaerts)

That "Bones" McCoy was a lonely man, Kirk knew. That he'd joined the service after some serious personal tragedy in his life, Kirk suspected. What he hadn't realized was the fierce pride in McCoy that made a virtual fetish of silence about any private pain. So he was startled by his violent reaction to the discovery that Nurse Chapel had exceeded what McCoy called her "professional authority."

Entering Sickbay, Kirk found her close to tears. "You had no business to call Captain Kirk!" McCoy was storming at her. "You're excused! You may go to your quarters!"

She blew her nose. "I'm a nurse first, Doctor—and a crew member of the *Enterprise* second," she said, chin firm under her reddened eyes.

"I said you were excused, Nurse!"

Christine swallowed. The hurt in her face was openly appealing. She blew her nose again, looking at Kirk, while McCoy said gruffly, "Christine, please—for God's sake, stop crying! I'll give the Captain a full report, I promise."

She hurried out, and Kirk said, "Well, that was quite a dramatic little scene."

McCoy squared his shoulders. "I've completed the standard physical examinations of the entire crew."

"Good," Kirk said.

"The crew is fit. I found nothing unusual—with one exception."

"Serious?"

"Terminal."

Kirk, shocked, said, "You're sure?"

"Positive. A rare blood disease. Affects one spaceship crew member in fifty thousand."

"What is it?"

"Xenopolycythemia. There is no cure."

"Who?"

"He has one year to live—at the outside chance. He should be relieved of duty as soon as possible." ,

Kirk spoke quietly. "Who is it, Bones?"

"The ship's chief medical officer."

There was a pause. Then Kirk said, "You mean yourself?"

McCoy reached for a colored tape cartridge on his desk. He stood at stiff attention as he handed it to Kirk. "That's the full report, sir. You'll want it quickly relayed to Starfleet Command—to arrange my replacement."

Wordless, Kirk just looked at him, too stunned to speak. After a moment, he replaced the cartridge on the desk as though it had bit him. McCoy said, "I'll be most effective on the job in the time left to me if you will keep this to yourself."

Kirk shook his head. "There must be something that can be done!"

"There isn't." McCoy's voice was harsh. "I've kept up on all the research. I've told you!"

The anguish on Kirk's face broke him. He sank down in the chair at his desk.

"It's terminal, Jim. Terminal."

Though red alert had been called on the *Enterprise*, Kirk was in his quarters. A "replacement" for Bones. Military language was a peculiar thing. How did one "replace" the experience of a human being—the intimacy, the friendship forged out of a thousand shared dangers?"One year to live—at the outside chance." When you got down to the brass tacks of the human portion, you wished that speech had never been invented. But it had been. Like red alerts. They'd been invented, too. In order to remind you that you were Captain of a starship as well as the longtime comrade of a dying man.

As he stepped from the bridge elevator, Spock silently rose from the command chair to relinquish it to him.

"What is that stuff on the screen, Mr Spock? Those moving pinpoints? A missile spread?"

"A very archaic type, Captain. Sublight space."

"Aye, and chemically fueled to boot, sir," Scott said.

"Anything on communications, Lieutenant Uhura?"

"Nothing, sir. All bands clear."

"Course of the missiles, Mr Spock?"

"The *Enterprise* would appear to be their target, Captain."

Prepare phaser banks. Yes. Two of them. He gave the order. "Get a fix, Mr Chekov, on the missiles' point of origin."

"Aye, Captain."

"Mr Sulu, fire phasers."

The clutch of missiles exploded in a blinding flash. "Well, that's that," Kirk said. "Mr Chekov, alter course to missile point of origin."

"Course change laid in, sir."

"Warp three, Mr Sulu."

Spock spoke from the computer station. "They were very ancient missiles, Captain. Sensor reading indicates an age of over ten thousand years."

"Odd," said Kirk. "How could they still be functional?"

"They evidently had an inertial guidance system that made any other communications control unnecessary."

"And the warheads, Captain," Scott said. "Nuclear fusion type according to my readings."

Spock spoke again. "We're approaching the coordinates of the hostile vessel, Captain."

"Get it on the screen, Mr Sulu."

The term "vessel" seemed to be inappropriate. What had appeared on the screen was a huge asteroid. It was roughly round, jagged, its rocky mass pitted by thousands of years of meteor hits.

"Mr Spock, we've got maximum magnification. Is the object on the screen what it looks to be—an asteroid?"

"Yes, sir. Some two hundred miles in diameter."

"Could the hostile vessel be hiding behind it?"

"Impossible, Captain. I've had that area under scanner constantly."

"Then the missiles' point of origin is that asteroid?"

"Yes, sir."

Kirk got up and went to Spock's station. "Full sensor probe, Mr Spock."

After a moment, Spock withdrew his head from his computer's hood. "Typical asteroid chemically but it is not orbiting, Captain. It

is pursuing an independent course through this solar system."

"How can it?" Kirk said. "Unless it's powered—a spaceship!"

Spock cocked an eyebrow in what for him was amazement. Then he said slowly, "It is under power—and correcting for all gravitational stresses." He dived under his hood again.

"Power source?" Kirk asked.

"Atomic, very archaic. Leaving a trail of debris and hard radiation."

Kirk frowned briefly. "Plot the course of the asteroid, Mr Chekov."

Once more Spock withdrew his head. "The asteroid's outer shell is hollow. It surrounds an independent inner core with a breathable atmosphere—sensors record no life forms."

"Then it must be on automatic controls," contributed Scott.

Spock nodded. "And its builders—or passengers—are dead."

Chekov said, "Course of asteroid—I mean spaceship—241 mark 17."

Spock had stooped swiftly to his console. He pushed several controls. Then he looked up. "Sir, that reading Ensign Chekov just gave us puts the asteroid ship on a collision course with planet Daran V!"

"Daran V!" Kirk stared at him. "My memory banks say that's an inhabited planet, Mr Spock!"

"Yes, sir. Population, approximately three billion,' seven hundred and twenty-four million." He paused, glancing back at his console panel. "Estimated time of impact: thirteen months, six days."

"Well," Kirk said. "That's a pretty extensive population." He whirled to Sulu. "Mr Sulu, match *Enterprise* speed with the asteroid ship's. Mr Spock and I are transporting aboard her. Mr Scott, you have the con."

They entered the Transporter Room to see Christine Chapel handing his tricorder to McCoy. "A lot can happen in a year," she was saying. "Give yourself every minute of it."

"Thanks," McCoy said, and slung the tricorder over his shoulder. Ignoring Kirk and Spock, he stepped up on the Transporter platform, taking position on one of its circles.

Kirk walked over to him. "Bones," he said, "Spock and I will handle this one."

"Without me?" McCoy said. "You'll never make it back here without me."

"I feel it would be wiser if…"

"I'm fine, thank you, Captain," McCoy brushed him off. "I want to go."

So that was how Bones wanted it played. He wasn't fatally ill. The word terminal might never have been spoken. "All right, Bones. You're probably right. If we make it back here, we'll need you with us." He took up his own position on the platform between Spock and McCoy.

They arrived on a land area of the asteroid ship. As though land on an asteroid weren't strange enough, strange plants, coiling black tendrils abounded, their strange roots sunk in deep, smoking fissures. High mountains shouldered up in the distance. Otherwise, the view showed only rubble and pockmarked rocks.

McCoy said, "You'd swear you were on a planet's surface."

Spock tossed away a stone he'd examined. "The question is, why make a ship look like a planet?"

"You wouldn't even know you were on a spaceship." Kirk jerked his com unit from his belt. "Kirk to *Enterprise*."

"Scott here, Captain."

"Transported without incident. Kirk out." He rehung his communicator on his belt, and was moving forward when, to his far left, his eye caught the glint of sunlight on metal. "Over there," he said. "Look…"

It was a row of metal cylinders. They were all about eight feet high, their width almost matching their height, and regularly spaced fifty feet apart. The men approached the nearest one, examining it carefully without touching it. "No apparent opening," Kirk observed.

"Spock, you found no intelligent life forms," McCoy said, "but surely these are evidence of…"

"This asteroid ship is ten thousand years old, Doctor. They may be evidence of the existence of some previous life forms." He checked his tricorder. "Certainly, there are no signs of life now."

They eyed the enigmatic cylinder again before they walked on to the next one. It was a duplicate of the first. As they reached the third, the two cylinders behind them suddenly opened, disgorging two groups of men, clad in shaggy homespun. Armed with short daggers and broadswords, they moved silently, trailing the *Enterprise* trio. A slim and beautiful woman followed them. She halted as the men charged.

The struggle was quick and violent. Outnumbered, Spock took several blows from sword hilts before he dropped to the ground, half-conscious. McCoy, head down, rushed a man off his feet, the momentum of his plunge crashing him into the woman. Her eyes widened in a surprise that contained no fear. Startled by her beauty, McCoy was brought up short, taking in the lustrous black hair piled on her head in fantastic loops, her glittering black leotard-like garment. Then he was stunned by a smash on the head. Kirk, going down under a swarming attack, saw the broadsword lifting up over McCoy and yelled, "*Bones!*"

The woman raised her right hand.

The broadsword was stayed in midstroke. McCoy was pulled to his feet. He shook his head, trying to clear it. Vaguely, he became aware of hands fumbling at his belt. Then his arms were jerked behind his back. Disarmed of phasers and communicators, he, Kirk and Spock were herded over to the woman.

"These are your weapons?" she asked, holding their belts in her right hand.

"Yes," Kirk said. "Of a kind. Weapons and communication devices. Let me help my friend!" He struggled to pull free. The woman made a commanding gesture.

Released, he rushed over to the still groggy McCoy. "Bones, are you all right?"

"I—I think so, Jim."

The woman's dark eyes were on McCoy. "I am called Natira," she told him. "I am the High Priestess of the People. Welcome to the world of Yonada."

"We have received more desirable welcomes," Kirk said.

She ignored him. "Bring them!" she ordered their guards.

She led the way to an open cylinder. They were in an apparently endless, lighted corridor, lined by curious people in their homespun clothing. As Natira passed them, they bowed deeply. She was nearing an arched portal. It was flanked by two ornately decorated pillars, their carvings suggestive of a form of writing, cut deep into the stone. Natira, bowing herself, touched some hidden device that opened the massive door. But keen-eyed Spock had registered its location. He had also observed the writing.

The large room they entered was dim, its sole light a glow that shone from under its central dais. Its rich ornamentation matched that of the portal. "You will kneel," Natira said.

There was no point, Kirk thought, in making an issue of it. He nodded at Spock and McCoy. They knelt. Natira, stepping onto the

dais, turned to what was clearly an altar. Etched into its stone was a design that resembled a solar system. As Natira fell to her knees before the altar, light filled the room.

McCoy, his voice lowered, said, "She called this the world. These people don't know they're on a spaceship," Kirk nodded. "Possible. The ship's been in flight for a long time."

"That writing," Spock said, "resembles the lexicography of the Fabrini."

But Natira, her arms upraised, was speaking. "O Oracle of the People, O most wise and most perfect, strangers have come to our world. They bear instruments we do not understand."

Light blazed from the altar. As though it had strengthened her to ask the question, she rose to her feet, turned and said, "Who are you?"

"I am Captain Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*. This is Dr McCoy, our Medical Officer. Mr Spock is my First Officer."

"And for what reason do you visit this world?"

The word "world" again. Kirk and McCoy exchanged a look.

"We come in friendship," Kirk said.

The sound of thunder crashed from the altar. A booming echo of the thunder, the voice of the Oracle spoke.

"Learn what it means to be our enemy. Learn what that means before you learn what it means to be our friend."

Lightning flashed. The three *Enterprise* men were felled to the floor by a near lethal charge of electricity'

McCoy was taking too long to recover consciousness. He continued to lay, white-faced, in a sleeping alcove of their lavishly decorated guest quarters. Spock, who had been trying to work out muscle spasms in his shoulders, joined Kirk at McCoy's couch.

"He must have suffered an excessively intense electrical shock," he said.

"No. I don't think that's it," Kirk said. He reached for McCoy's pulse. Spock, aware of the deep concern in Kirk's face, was puzzled. "Nothing else could have caused this, sir." He paused. "That is—nothing that has occurred down *here*."

Kirk glanced up at Spock. He knew that the Vulcan had sensed something of the real cause of his anxiety. "The shock was unusually serious because of McCoy's weakened condition," he said.

"May I ask precisely what is troubling the Doctor?"

"Yes, Mr Spock. He'd never tell you himself. But now I think he'd want you to know. He has xenopolycythemia."

Spock stiffened. After a long moment, he said quietly, "I know of the disease, Captain."

"Then you know there's nothing that can be done." As he spoke, McCoy stirred. His eyes opened. Kirk stooped over him. "How is it now, Bones?"

"All right," McCoy said. He sat up, pulling himself rapidly together. "How are *you*, Spock?"

"Fine, thank you. The Captain and I must have received a less violent electrical charge."

Falsely hearty, McCoy said, "That Oracle really got to me. I must be especially susceptible to his magic spells."

"Spock knows," Kirk said. "I told him, Bones."

There was relief in McCoy's face. He stood up. "Hadn't we better find this ship's control room and get these people off their collision course?"

"You're in no shape to be up," Kirk said.

"Ridiculous!" McCoy said. "*I'm up!*"

Kirk saw one of the alcove's curtains sway. He strode . to it, jerking it aside. A shabby old man, fear in his face, was huddled against the wall. He peered into Kirk's face. What he saw in it must have reassured him. He moved away from the wall, hesitated, took some powder from a pouch hung over his shoulder. "For strength," he said. He held out the pouch to them. "Many of us have felt the power of our Oracle. This powder will be of benefit. You are not of Yonada."

"No," Kirk said gently. "We come from outside your world."

The old hand reached out to touch Kirk's arm. "You are as we are?"

"The same," Kirk said.

"You are the first to come here. I am ignorant. Tell me of the outside."

"What do you wish to know?"

"Where is outside?"

Kirk pointed skyward. "It's up there."

The filmed eyes glanced up at the ceiling. Like a child put off by an adult lie, the old man looked back at Kirk in mixed disbelief and

disappointment. Kirk smiled at him. "The outside is up there and all around."

"So *they* say, also," the old man said sadly. "Years ago, I climbed the mountains, even though it is forbidden."

"Why is it forbidden?" Kirk asked.

"I am not sure. But things are not as they teach us—for the world is hollow and I have touched the sky."

The voice had sunk into a terrified whisper. As he uttered the last words, the old man screamed in sudden agony, clutching at his temples. He collapsed in a sprawled heap on the floor. Horrified, Kirk saw a spot on one temple flash into a pulsating glow. Then the flare died.

McCoy examined the spot. "Something under the skin." He moved the shabby homespun to check the heart. "Jim, he's dead."

Kirk looked down at the heap. " 'For the world is hollow and I have touched the sky.' What an epitaph for a human life!"

Spock said, "He said it was forbidden to climb the mountains."

"Of course it's forbidden," Kirk said. "If you climbed the mountains, you might discover you were living in an asteroid spaceship, not in the world at all. *That* I'll bet is the forbidden knowledge."

"What happened?"

It was Natira. She had entered their quarters with two women bearing platters of fruit and wine. At the sight of the crumpled body, their faces convulsed with terror. But Natira knelt down beside it.

"We don't know what happened," Kirk told her. "He suddenly screamed in pain—and died."

She bent her head in prayer. "Forgive him, O Oracle, most wise and most perfect. He was an old man—and old men are sometimes foolish." She rose to her feet. "But it is written that those of the People who sin or speak evil will be punished."

The severity in her face softened into sadness. She touched a wall button. To the guards who entered she said, "Take him away—gently. He served well and for many years." Then she spoke to the women. "Place the food on the table and go."

As the door closed behind them, she crossed to McCoy. "You do not seem well. It is distressing to me."

"No," he said. "I am all right."

"It is the wish of the Oracle that you now be treated as honored guests. I will serve you with my own hands." But the tray she

arranged with fruit and wine was taken to McCoy. When she left them to prepare the other trays, Kirk said, "You seem favored, Bones."

"Indeed, Doctor," Spock said, "the lady has shown a preference for you from the beginning."

"Nobody can blame her for that," McCoy retorted.

"Personally," Kirk said, "I find her taste questionable." McCoy, sipping wine, said, "My charm has always been fatal," but Kirk noted that his eyes were nevertheless fixed on the graceful bend of the woman at the table. "If it's so fatal," he said, "why don't you arrange to spend some time alone with the lady? Then Spock and I might find a chance to locate the power controls of this place."

Natira was back, holding two goblets of wine. "It is time that our other guests refresh themselves."

Kirk lifted his goblet. "To our good friends of Yonada."

"We are most interested in your world," Spock said.

"That pleases us."

"Then perhaps you wouldn't mind if we looked around a bit," Kirk ventured.

"You will be safe," she said. "The People know of you now."

McCoy coughed uncomfortably. She went to him swiftly. "I do not think you are yet strong enough to look around with your friends."

"Perhaps not," he smiled.

"Then why not remain here? Rest—and we will talk."

She was beautiful. "I should like that," McCoy said.

She turned to Kirk. "But you—you and Mr Spock—you are free to go about and meet our People."

"Thank you," he said. "We appreciate your looking after Dr McCoy."

"Not at all," she inclined her head. "We shall make him well." She saw them to the door. Then she hastened back to McCoy. As she sat down on the couch beside him, he said, "I am curious. How did the Oracle punish the old man?"

The dark lashes lowered. "I—cannot tell you now."

"There's some way by which the Oracle knows what you say, isn't there?"

"What we say—what we think. The Oracle knows the minds and hearts of all the People."

McCoy's forehead creased with a worried frown.

Concerned, Natira extended a white hand that tried to stroke the frown away. "I did not know you would be hurt so badly."

"Perhaps we had to learn the power of the Oracle."

"McCoy. There is something I must say. Since the moment I saw you—" She took a deep breath. "It is not the custom of the People to hide their feelings."

McCoy said to himself, Watch your step, boy. But to her, he said, "Honesty is usually wisdom."

"Is there a woman for you?" she asked.

He could smell the fragrance of the lustrous black hair near his shoulder. This woman was truthful as well as beautiful. So he gave her the truth. "No," he said. "No, there isn't."

The lashes lifted—and he got the full impact of her open femininity. "Does McCoy find me attractive?"

"Yes," he said. "I do. I do indeed."

She took his face between her hands, looking deep into his eyes. "I hope you men of space—of other worlds, hold truth as dear as we do."

Watching his step was becoming difficult. "We do," he said.

"It is dear to me," she said. "So I wish you to stay here on Yonada. I want you for my mate."

McCoy took one of the hands from his face and kissed it. The Eagle Scout in him whispered, Brother, douse this campfire. But in him was also a man under sentence of death; a man with one year to live—one with a new, very intense desire to make that last year count. He turned the hand over to kiss its palm. "But we are strangers to each other," he said.

"Is it not the nature of men and women—that pleasure lies in learning about each other?"

"Yes."

"Then let the thought rest in your heart, McCoy, while I tell you about the Promise. In the fullness of time, the People will reach a new world, rich, green, so lovely to the eyes it will fill them with tears of joy. You can share that new world with me. You shall be its master because you'll be my master."

"When will you reach this new world?"

"Soon. The Oracle will only say—soon."

There was an innocence about her that opened his heart. Incredibly, he heard himself cry out, "Natira, Natira, if you only knew how much I've needed a future!"

"You have been lonely," she said. She picked up the wine glass and held it to his lips. "It is all over, the loneliness. There shall be no more loneliness for you."

He drank and set the glass aside. "Natira—there's something I must tell you…"

"Sssh," she said. "There is nothing you need to say."

"But there is."

She removed the hand she had placed over his mouth. "Then tell me, if the telling is such a need."

"I am ill," he said. "I have an illness for which there is no cure. I have one year to live, Natira."

The dark eyes did not flinch. "A year can be a lifetime, McCoy."

"It is my entire lifetime."

"Until I saw you my heart was empty. It sustained my life—and nothing more. Now it sings. I am grateful for the feeling that you have made it feel whether it lasts for a day—a month—a year—whatever time the Creators give to us."

He took her in his arms.

Kirk and Spock were meeting curious looks as they walked down a corridor of the asteroid ship. The more people they encountered, the clearer it became they had no inkling of the real nature of their world. Spock said, "Whoever built this ship must have given them a religion that would control their curiosity."

"Judging by the old man, suppressing curiosity is handled very directly," Kirk said. They had reached the portal of the Oracle Room. Pretending to a casual interest in its carved stone pillars, Spock eyed them keenly. "Yes," he said, "the writing is that of the Fabrini. I can read it."

"Fabrina?" Kirk said. "Didn't the sun of the Fabrina system go nova and destroy its planets?"

"It did, Captain. Toward the end, the Fabrini lived underground as the people do here."

"Perhaps some of them were put aboard this ship to be sent to another planet." Kirk glanced up and down the corridor. It was almost empty. "And these are their descendants."

They were alone now in the corridor. Kirk tried and, failed to open the Oracle Room's door. Spock touched the secret opening device set into one of the pillars. Inside, they flattened themselves against a wall. The door closed behind them. Nothing happened.

Kirk, his voice low, said, "The Oracle doesn't seem to know we are here. What alerted it the first time?"

Spock moved a few steps toward the central dais. "Captain, the Oracle's misbehavior occurred when Natira knelt on that platform." Kirk stepped onto the platform. He walked carefully around it. Again, nothing happened. "Mr Spock, continue investigating. The clue to the control place must be here somewhere." But carvings on a wall had caught Spock's attention. "More writing," he said. "It says nothing to suggest this is anything but a planet. Nor is there any question that the builders of the ship are to be considered gods."

Kirk had found a stone monolith set in a niche. It bore a carved design of a sun and planets. Spock joined him. "Eight planets, Captain. Eight. That was the number in the solar system of Fabrina."

"Then there's no doubt that these People are the Fabrini's descendants?"

"None, sir. And no doubt they have been in flight on this asteroid ship for ten thousand years." As Spock spoke, there was the sound of the door opening. They hastily slid behind the monolith. Kirk cautiously peered around it to see Natira, alone, crossing the room to the platform. She knelt. As before, hot light flared from the altar.

"Speak," said the Oracle.

"It is I, Natira."

"Speak."

"It is written that only the High Priestess of the People may select her mate."

"It is so written."

"For the rest of the People—mating and bearing is only permitted by the will of the Creators."

"Of necessity. Our world is small."

"The three strangers among us—there is one among them called McCoy. I wish him to remain with the People—as my mate."

Kirk gave a soundless whistle. Bones certainly had lost no time. Spock cocked an eyebrow, looking at Kirk.

"Does the stranger agree to this?" queried the Oracle.

"I have asked him. He has not yet given me his answer."

"He must become one of the People. He must worship the Creators and agree to the insertion of the obedience instrument."

"He will be told what must be done."

"If he agrees to all things, it is permitted. Teach him our laws so that he commits no sacrilege, no offense against the People—or the Creators."

"It shall be as you say, O most wise."

Natira rose, bowed twice, backed away from the altar and walked toward the door. As Kirk watched her go, his sleeve brushed against the monolith's carved design. The Oracle Room reverberated with a high-pitched, ululating whine. Natira wheeled from the door. The whine turned to a blazing white light. It turned to focus on Kirk and Spock. They went rigid, unable to move.

Natira rushed to the altar.

"Who are the intruders?" demanded the booming voice.

"Two of the strangers."

"McCoy is one of them?"

"No."

"These two have committed sacrilege. You know what must be done."

"I know."

Guards rushed into the room. The light that held Kirk and Spock died, leaving them dazed. Natira pointed to them. "Take them," she told the guards.

As they were seized, she walked up to them. "You have been most foolish," she said. "You have misused our hospitality. And you have more seriously sinned—a sin for which death is the punishment!"

Natira withstood the storm of McCoy's wrath quietly. As he paused in his furious pacing of her quarters, she said—and for the third time—"They entered the Oracle Room."

"And why is death the penalty for that?" he shouted, "They acted out of ignorance!"

"They said they came in friendship. They betrayed our trust. I can make no other decision." He wheeled to face her. "Natira, you must let them return to their ship!"

"I cannot."

"For me," he said. He pulled her from her couch and into his arms. "I have made my decision. I'm staying with you—here on Yonada."

She swayed with the relief of her love. Into the ear against his cheek, McCoy said, "What they did, they did because they thought they had to. You will not regret letting them go. I am happy for

the first time in my life. How can I remain happy, knowing you commanded the death of my friends?"

She lifted her mouth for his kiss. "So be it," she said. "I will give you their lives to show you my love."

"My heart sings now," McCoy said. "Let me tell them. They will need their communications units to return to their ship."

"Very well, McCoy. All shall be as you wish."

He left her for the corridor where Kirk and Spock were waiting under guard. He nodded to the guards. When they disappeared down the corridor, he handed the communicators to Kirk. Kirk passed one to Spock. "Where's yours?" he asked. "You're coming with us, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not," McCoy said.

"But this isn't a planet, Bones! It's a spaceship on a collision course with Daran V!"

"Jim, I'm on something of a collision course myself."

"I order you to return to the ship, Dr McCoy!"

"And I refuse! I intend to stay right here—on this ship. Natira has asked me to stay. So I shall stay."

"As her husband?"

"Yes. I love her." There were tears in his eyes. "Is it so much to ask, Jim, to let me love?"

"No." Kirk straightened his shoulders. "But does she know—how much of a future you'll have together?"

"Yes. I have told her."

"Bones, if the course of this ship isn't corrected, we'll have to blow it out of space."

"I'll find a way—or you will. You won't destroy Yonada and the people."

Kirk shook his head. "This isn't like you—suddenly giving up—quitting—not fighting any more. You're sick—and you're hiding behind a woman's skirts!"

McCoy swung a fist and Kirk took it square on the chin. He staggered. Spock steadied him. McCoy was yelling, "Sick? Not fighting? Come on, Captain! Try me again!"

Very grave, Spock said, "This conduct is very unlike you, Doctor."

Kirk fumbled for his communicator. "Kirk calling *Enterprise*. Come in, *Enterprise*."

"Scott here, Captain."

"Lock in on our signals. Transport Mr Spock and me aboard at once."

"What about Dr McCoy?"

Yes, indeed. What *about* Doctor McCoy? He looked at his friend. "He is staying here, Mr Scott. Kirk out."

Spock moved to Kirk, flipping open his own communicator. McCoy backed away. They broke into sparkle—and were gone. Savagely, McCoy dragged a sleeve over his tear blinded eyes.

Custom required him to stand alone before the Oracle.

It spoke.

"To become one of the People of Yonada, the instrument of obedience must be made part of your flesh. Do you now give your consent?"

Natira came forward. She crossed to another side of the altar and opened a small casket.

"I give my consent," McCoy said. As she removed a small device from the casket, her dark eyes met his with a look of pure love. "Say now, McCoy," she said. "For once it is done, it is done."

"Let it be done," he said.

She came to him. Placing the device against his temple, she activated it. He heard a hissing sound. There was a thudding in his head. Instinctively his hand went to the place of insertion. "You are now one with my People," she said. "Kneel with me."

He reached for her hand. She said, "I here pledge you the love you want and will make beautiful your time."

"We are now of one mind," he said.

"One heart."

"One life," he said.

"We shall build the new world of the Promise together, O most wise and most perfect." They rose. She moved into his arms and he kissed her.

The Oracle said, "Teach him what he must know as one of the people."

Natira bowed. Obediently, she led McCoy to the stone monolith. She touched a button—and the carved inset depicting a sun and eight planets slid aside to reveal a large book. "This is the Book of the People," she said. "It is to be opened and read when we reach the world of the Promise. It was given by the Creators."

"Do the People know the contents of the book?"

"Only that it tells of our world here. And why we must one day leave it for the new one."

"Has the reason for leaving been revealed to the People?"

"No! It has not."

Then they'd been right, McCoy realized. Yonada's inhabitants were unaware they lived on a spaceship. "Has it been revealed to you, Natira? As the Priestess of the People?"

She shook her head. "I know only of the new world promised to us, much greater than this little one—verdant and fruitful but empty of living beings. It waits for us."

"Don't you long to know the book's secrets?"

"It is enough for me to know that we shall understand all that now is hidden when we reach our home." She touched the button in the monolith. Its carved inset slid back.

"What is the law concerning the book?"

"To touch it—to allow it to be seen by a nonbeliever is blasphemy to be punished by death."

On the *Enterprise* Kirk had made his first act a report to Starfleet Command. It had to be told, not only of McCoy's critical illness, but of their failure to correct the collision course of the asteroid ship. Its Chief of Operations, Admiral Westervliet himself, appeared on the screen in Kirk's quarters to respond to the news.

"Medical Headquarters will supply you with a list of space physicians and their biographies, Captain. You will find a replacement for Dr McCoy among them."

Kirk addressed the stiffly mustached face on the screen. "Yes, Admiral. However, Starfleet's orders to continue our mission is creating difficulties."

"Difficulties? Perhaps I've failed to make myself clear, Captain. You have been relieved of all responsibility for alteration of the course of the asteroid ship Yonada. Starfleet Command will take care of the situation."

"That is the problem, sir," Kirk said.

"A problem? For whom?"

"My crew, sir. Dr McCoy's illness has become generally known. His condition forced us to leave him on Yonada. His safety depends on the safety of Yonada. To leave this area before

Yonada's safety is certain would create a morale problem for the crew. It's a purely human one, of course."

Westervliet had a habit of attacking his mustache when human problems were mentioned. Now it was taking a beating.

"Yes," he said. "Well, Captain Kirk, I certainly sympathize with your wish to remain in Dr McCoy's vicinity. But the general mission of the *Enterprise* is galactic investigation. You will continue with it."

"Yes, Admiral," Kirk said. "One request, however. Should a cure for Doctor McCoy's disease be discovered, will you advise the *Enterprise*?"

"That is not a request, Captain. Between you and me, it's an order, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Kirk, switching off the screen, sat still in his chair. McCoy had made his choice. No appeal had been able to change it. And who was to say it wasn't the right one? A year of life with a woman's love against a year of life without it. Bones. He was going to miss him. The intercom squeaked. He rose to hit the button. "Kirk here."

"Dr McCoy for you, Captain," Uhura said. "He has an urgent message."

"Put him on!"

"Jim?"

"Yes, Bones."

"We may be able to get these people back on course!"

Kirk's pulse raced. "Have you located the controls?"

"No—but I've seen a book that contains all the knowledge of Yonada's builders. If you can get to it, Spock can dig out the information."

"Where is it?" Kirk asked.

A scream of agony burst from the intercom. "Bones! What's happening? Bones!"

Silence. Frantic, Kirk tried again. "McCoy, what *is* it? What has been done to you? Bones, come in…"

But he knew what had happened. Torture, death.

The Oracle had taken McCoy's life in exchange for his forbidden revelation.

Kirk's jaw muscles set hard. "Transporter Room," he told the intercom.

He and Spock materialized in Natira's quarters. She was cradling McCoy's head in her arms. But his face was contorted with pain. Kirk saw him struggle to lift his head. It sank back into Natira's lap.

She looked at them. Dully, her voice toneless, she said, "You have killed your friend. I will have you put to death."

"Let me help you," Kirk said.

"Until you are dead, he will think of you and disobey. While you live, my beloved cannot forget you. So I shall see you die."

She made a move to get up and Kirk grabbed her, clapping his hand over her mouth. "Spock," he said, "help McCoy."

"Yes, Captain." Spock unslung his tricorder. From it he removed a tiny electronic device. Bending over McCoy's motionless body, he pressed the device on the spot where the instrument of obedience had been inserted. When he withdrew it, the insert was clinging to it. He jerked it clear. Then he handed it to Natira. She stared at him, unbelieving. A little moan broke from her. Kirk released her. She sank to the floor. After a moment, she pulled herself up to her hands and knees and crawled over to McCoy. She touched his temple. "My beloved is again a stranger. We are no longer one life." She burst into passionate weeping. "Why have you done this to us? Why?"

"He is still yours," Kirk said gently.

The tears choked her. "It is—forbidden. He is not of our people—now. You have released him—from his vow of obedience."

"We have released him from the cruelty of your Oracle," Kirk said.

She closed her eyes, unhearing, her body racked with sobs. Beside her, Kirk saw McCoy's eyelids flicker open. He went to him quickly, bending over him. "You spoke of a book," he said. "Where is it, Bones?"

Natira leaped to her feet with a shriek. "You must not know! You must not know that!"

McCoy looked up into Kirk's eyes. "The Oracle Room," he whispered.

"You will never see the Book!" cried Natira. "It is blasphemy!" She ran to the door, calling, "Guards! Guards!"

Kirk caught her, closing his hand over her mouth again. "You must listen to me, Natira!" She pulled away from him and he jerked her back. "*Listen to me!* If you do not understand what I

tell you, you may call the guards. And we will accept whatever punishment is decreed. *But now you must listen!*"

She slowly lifted the tear-wet lashes. "What is it you wish to say?"

"I shall tell you the truth, Natira—the truth about your world of Yonada. And you will trust it as true as a child trusts what is true. Years ago, ten thousand years ago, a sun died and the sun's worlds died with it.

Its worlds were the eight ones you see pictured on the stone pillar in the Oracle Room."

"Yonada is one of those worlds," she said.

"No. It was the world of your ancestors—your creators." He paused to give her time. After a moment, he quietly added, "It no longer exists, Natira."

"You are mad," she whispered. "You are mad."

"Hear me out, Natira! Your ancestors knew their world was about to die. They wanted their race to live. So they built a great ship. On it they placed their best people. Then they sent them and the ship into space."

"You wish me to believe that Yonada is a ship?"

"Yes," Kirk said.

"But we have a sun! It did not die. And at night I see the stars!"

"No. You have never seen the sun. You have never seen the stars. You live inside a hollow ball. Your fathers created the ball to protect you—to take you on the great journey to the new safe world of the Promise."

In her face he could see half-thought thoughts reviving, completing themselves. But the growing perception was painful. Yet it had come. She spoke very slowly. "The truth—why do you bring it to Yonada?"

"We had to. Your ship has done well—but its machinery is tired. It must be mended. If we don't mend it, Yonada will strike and kill another great world it knows nothing about."

Belief flooded into her. With it came the realization of betrayal.

"Why has this truth not been told us? Why have we been kept in darkness?"

Kirk went to her. But she pushed him away, overwhelmed by the sense of an incredible treachery. "No! You have lied! I believe only the Oracle! I must believe!"

Kirk said, "Let us remove the instrument of obedience. Let us remove it for the truth's sake."

She was gone, fled out the door. Kirk turned to Spock. "Do you think she understood me?" he said. But Spock was at the open door. Kirk saw him nod pleasantly to a passing guard before he quietly closed the door. "She hasn't sent the guards to detain us, Captain. It is my supposition that she understood a great deal."

Behind them, McCoy had struggled shakily to his feet. Now he pushed past them. "Natira! I have to go to her. I must go to her in the Oracle Room."

She was on her knees before the altar, her eyes shut in rapt devotion.

The thunder voice spoke. "You have listened to the words of the nonbelievers."

"I have listened."

"You felt the pain of warning."

"I felt the pain of warning."

"Why did you listen further?"

"They said they spoke the truth."

"Their truth is not your truth."

She opened her eyes. "Is truth not truth for all?"

"There is only one for you. Repent your disobedience."

"I must know the truth of the world!" she cried.

At the sound of her scream, Kirk rushed into the Oracle Room. He lifted Natira from the dais, but McCoy, reaching for her, took her in his arms, holding her close. Her body was stiff under spasms of pain. As one passed, she reached out a hand to caress his face. "Your friends have told me—much."

"They spoke the truth," McCoy said.

"I believe you. I believe…"

Agony convulsed her again. She fought it bravely. "I believe with you, my husband. We have been kept in darkness."

McCoy extended a hand to Spock. The tiny electronic device performed its function once more. When McCoy lifted it from Natira's temple, it held the obedience insert. He held it up for her to see. The grief of a great loss shadowed her dark eyes as she lapsed into unconsciousness.

"Is she all right?" Kirk asked.

"She will be. I'll stay with her."

Kirk said, "Mr Spock—the Fabrina inset."

They were crossing to the monolith when the Oracle spoke, a fierce anger in its voice. "You blaspheme the temple!"

Kirk turned. "We do this for the survival of Yonada's people."

"You are forbidden to gaze at the Book!"

"We must consult it to help the people!"

"The punishment is death."

Kirk looked back at McCoy. "Bones?"

"Depress the side section," McCoy said.

A blast of heat struck them. Around them the walls had turned a radiant red. Even as he pressed the side of the monolith, the air he breathed was scorching Kirk's lungs. But the inset had slid open. He seized the book and passed it to Spock. "It must contain the plan. Is it indexed?"

"Yes, Captain. Here's the page…"

Yellow, brittle with age, the page's parchment showed the same idealized sun, the same planet placements as the altar design and the inset. Arrows pointed to three of the planets. Spock translated the Fabrini writing at the top of the page. "Apply pressure simultaneously to the planets indicated."

The walls were glowing hotter. Spock tossed the book aside and they raced for the altar plaque. As Kirk pushed at the three planets, the altar moved forward. Then it stopped. Spock slid into the space behind it Before he followed him, Kirk turned back to McCoy and Natira. "Let's get out of this heat," he called.

Spock had found a short passageway. As he approached its end wall, it lifted. At once he heard the hum of electronic power. A light shone on a button crowded console. Spock studied it for a moment. Then he pressed a button. The light went out. "I've neutralized that heating element!" he called back to the others.

The heat in the Oracle Room rapidly cooled. Kirk and McCoy sat Natira down against an altar wall. "You'll be all right here now," Kirk said. "The Oracle can no longer punish."

He saw her rest her glossy head against McCoy's shoulder. Looking up at him, she said, "Your friends have ended the punishments?" He nodded. "And will they send this—this ship on to the place of the Promise?"

"Yes," he said. "That is their promise. Now I must help them. Come with me."

"No," she said.

"There is nothing to fear now, Natira. So come. We must hurry to join them."

"No. I cannot go with you." She paused. "It is not fear that holds me. I now understand the great purpose of our fathers. I must

honor it, McCoy."

He stared at her in unbelief. "You mean to stay here—on Yonada?"

"I must remain with my people throughout our great journey."

"Natira, trust me! The Oracle will not harm us!"

"I stay because it is what I must do," she said.

"I will not leave you," McCoy said.

"Will McCoy stay here to die?"

The question shocked him into silence. He fell to his knees beside her. "Natira, you have given me reason to wish to live. But wishing is not enough. I must search through the universe to cure myself—and all those like me. I wanted you with me—with me…"

"This is my universe," she said. "You came here to save my people. Shall I abandon them?"

"I love you," McCoy said.

She kissed him. "If it is permitted, perhaps one day you, too, will see the land of our Promise…"

It was goodbye. And he knew it. He reached for her blindly through a mist of tears.

In the asteroid ship's control room, Spock had located a weakness in one of its consoles' eight tubes.

"Enough to turn it off course?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, Captain. The engine can take a check." Kirk, studying control panels, was reminded of those of the *Enterprise*. "A very simple problem," Spock called from the engine room. "And comparatively easy to repair."

He came back, holding one hand out stiffly. "I think we can now attempt the course correction, sir."

"What was wrong?"

"In creating a completely natural environment for the people on this ship, its builders included many life forms—including insects. A control jet in there was blocked by a hornets' nest."

"You're not serious, Mr Spock?"

Spock held up a forefinger. It was swollen to twice its normal size. "I destroyed the nest," he said. "In doing so, I was stung." He sat down, resuming his watch of the console instruments. "The guidance system is taking over, sir. I think we can revert to automatic controls."

"She's steady on course now," Kirk said.

They released the manual controls and were heading back to the Oracle Room when Spock stopped at a screened console of complex design. "Knowledge files," he said. "Those banks are filled with the total knowledge of the Fabrini. I presume they were prepared for the people to consult when they reach their destination." He left Kirk to examine the console more closely. "They seem to have amassed a great deal of medical knowledge."

Unslinging his tricorder, he slipped a taped disk into it. He passed it over the console. "The knowledge of the builders of this ship could be extremely valuable—even though it is ten thousand years old."

McCoy spoke from behind them. "Gentlemen, are we ready to return to the *Enterprise*?"

Kirk stared at him. It was best to ask no questions, he thought. "Yes, Bones, we are," he said. He flipped open his com unit. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Landing party ready to beam aboard."

The screen in Sickbay held a series of chemical formulas in the Fabrini writing. Kirk and Spock, watching Christine Chapel prepare another airhypo injection, saw that her hands were shaking. She noticed it, too. To quiet her agitation, she glanced at the life indicators at the head of McCoy's bed. The steady blinking of their lights steadied her. She thrust the airhypo into a green liquid.

"Not another one?" McCoy said as she approached his bed. He made a face as the hypo took effect. But already it had made a fast change in the life support panel.

"Excellent, Doctor," Christine said. "You're quite able to see for yourself. The white corpuscle count is back to normal." She reached an arm under his shoulders to help him check the panel behind him. He still looked pained.

"Tell me, Doctor," Kirk wanted to know. "Why are cures so often as painful as the disease?"

"Jim, that is a very sore subject with medical men."

"Dr McCoy," Spock said reprovingly, "it seems that the Fabrini cure for granulation of the hemoglobin has seriously damaged your gift for witty repartee."

Nurse Chapel had filled the hypo again. "This is the last one, Doctor."

Spock, his eyes on the life support panel, achieved a Vulcan triumph. Joy radiated from his impassive face. "Your hemoglobin count is now completely normal, Doctor. So the flow of oxygen to all the cells of your body is again up to its abundantly energetic level."

McCoy sat up. "Spock, I owe this to you. Had you " not brought back that Fabrini knowledge…"

"My translation abilities are one of my most minor accomplishments," Spock said. "If you consider my major ones, Doctor…"

"I wonder if there's a Fabrini cure for a swelled head," McCoy speculated.

Kirk intervened. "Bones, the Fabrini descendants are, scheduled to debark on their promised planet in exactly fourteen months and seven days."

The grin left McCoy's face. He looked at Kirk.

"Yes," Kirk said. "I expect you'd like to see the Fabrini descendants again to thank them personally. So I've arranged to be in the vicinity of their new home at the time of their arrival. You will want to be there to welcome them, won't you?"

"Thank you, Jim," McCoy said. "Thank you very much."

DAY OF THE DOVE

(Jerome Bixby)

Though the planet had said it was under attack by an unidentified spacecraft, the *Enterprise* landing party had found only black dust, white rocks and strange clumps of moving plants. Its tricorders—McCoy's as well as Chekov's—refused to report any evidence of a colony or of people who could have signaled the message. Yet they had existed.

Kirk stooped for a handful of the black, powdery soil. "An SOS from a human settlement—one hundred men, women and children. All gone. Who did it? Why?"

As if in reply, his communicator beeped. "Spock here, sir. Sensors have picked up a Klingon ship closing in fast."

"Deflectors on, Mr Spock! Protect yourselves. Total response if attacked." He closed the communicator, his face grim. So that was the answer—Klingons. They had destroyed the settlement. But Spock had more news of the Klingon ship. "Trouble aboard her, Captain. Evidence of explosions… massive damage. We never fired at her."

"Maintain full alert, Mr Spock."

Behind his group the air was collecting into dazzle. Six Klingons in their stiff metallic tabards were materializing, their weapons aimed and ready. Their leader was the first to assume full shape. His hard, slant-eyed face distorted by fury, he reached out and swung Kirk around. "You attacked my ship!" he shouted. "Four hundred of my crew—dead! My vessel is disabled. I claim yours! You are prisoners of the Klingon Empire for committing a wanton act of war against it!" He nodded to his men. "Disarm them!"

Kirk had recognized the harsh, Mongol-like features. The Klingons' Kang. "We took no action against your ship," he said.

He'd been hustled into line with Chekov and McCoy. Kang paced before them. "For three years your Federation and our Empire have been at peace… a treaty we have honored to the letter…"

Kirk protested again. "We did not attack your ship.".

"Were the screams of my men imaginary? What were your secret orders? To start a war? You have succeeded! Or maybe to test a new weapon. We shall be interested to examine it!"

Kirk said, "There was a Federation colony on this planet. It was destroyed."

"And by what? I see no bodies, no ruins. A colony of the invisible!"

"Perhaps a new *Klingon* weapon that leaves no traces. Federation ships don't specialize in sneak attacks!"

Along the ground near Kang a small, mushroom-shaped crystal was floating. Its swirling red color was concealed by a white rock and a faint, ugly throbbing came from it.

Kirk's patience was ebbing. No denial of guilt seemed able to penetrate the heavy bones of Kang's hairless skull. "You lured my ship into ambush with a false Klingon distress call!"

Kirk stared at him. "*You* received a distress call? *We* were the ones who received it!"

"I don't propose to spend any more time arguing your fantasies, Kirk! The *Enterprise* is ours! Instruct your Transporter Room. We are ready to beam aboard."

"Go to the devil," Kirk said.

"We have no devil—but we understand the habits of yours…" Still hidden among the rocks, the crystal's red glow brightened as Kang burst out, "I will torture you to death, one by one! Who will be the first? You, Kirk?"

Chekov suddenly exploded into action. He charged Kang, sobbing with rage. "*Swine! Filthy Klingon murderers!*" Kirk made a grab for him, missed—and Kang's men beat him to the ground. But he still sought to get at Kang. "*You killed my brother! Piotr!*—the Arcanis Four Research Outpost… a hundred peaceful people massacred—*just as you did here! My brother, Piotr*…"

Kang looked down at him. "So you volunteer to join him. That is loyalty." He gestured to one of his men. A sputtering device was pushed against Chekov's neck. He writhed with agony, doubled up. Kirk, wrenching forward, was immobilized by the Klingons. The device was readjusted—and Chekov screamed.

"You win, Kang!" Kirk said. "Stop the torture!"

"Jim!" McCoy cried. "You can't hand over the *Enterprise!*"

"Help Chekov, Bones."

Kang was eyeing Kirk. "Don't plan any tricks. I will kill a hundred hostages at the first sign of treachery!"

"I'll beam you aboard the *Enterprise*. Once we're there—no tricks."

"Your word?"

Kirk nodded; and Chekov, still convulsed with pain, cried, "Captain!—we can't!… don't let these… *animals*… have the ship!"

"Animals?" Kang said. "Your captain crawls like one. A Klingon would not have surrendered." He turned to Kirk. "Order everyone in this area to be transported up." He said something to his men, and Kirk, ringed by weapons, opened his communicator.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*. Mr Spock…"

"Here, Captain."

"We have guests," Kirk told him. "Adjust Transporter for wide-field and beam-up everyone in the target area." His finger pressed a tiny control on the communicator.

"Yes, Captain."

Everybody shimmered out, Kirk under the weapons, Chekov supported by McCoy, both glaring.

In the *Enterprise* Transporter Room, only the landing party materialized. No Klingons stood on the platform.

Kirk stepped off his pad. "Full Security on the double, Mr Galloway! Good work, Spock!"

As Galloway hit the intercom, the bewildered McCoy said, "What—happened?"

"Landing party brought up intact," Spock told him.

At the console, Scott spoke. "All others suspended in transit. Who are the guests, by the way, Captain?"

"Klingons."

Scott grinned happily, slapping the console. "They're in here—until we decide to rematerialize them."

"Galloway?" Kirk said.

"Security squads on the way, sir."

Chekov's voice was thick with hate. "Captain! Leave them on the planet! Leave them where they are! In nonexistence. That's so many less Klingon monsters in the galaxy!"

"And that's what they would do." Kirk said. As the Security detail rushed through the door, he spoke to the Transporter Chief. "Bring them in."

The six Klingons sparkled into shape on the platform. They all stiffened, taking in the changed situation. Outnumbered by the

Security men, they made no resistance as they were disarmed. The weaponless Kang looked at Kirk.

"Liar!" He spat the word.

"I said no tricks *after* we reached the ship." Kirk stepped forward, formal, terse. "You are prisoners of the United Federation of Planets against which you may or. may not have committed an act of war."

"There are survivors still aboard my ship," Kang said.

Kirk nodded to the Transporter chief and Scott said, "Captain, we haven't been able to get through to Starfleet Command. All subspace frequencies are blocked. And there's too much radiation from the Klingon ship—it's a hazard to the vicinity."

"Prepare to destruct, Scotty."

"Completing the job you started!"

Kirk wheeled on Kang. "You wouldn't be standing there if I had."

The surviving Klingons were shimmering into form. Of the six, several were women. One, queenly, graceful, her dark eyes gleaming under the epicanthic fold of their Mongol lids, left the platform to go at once to Kang. He took her arm. "This is Mara—my wife and my Science officer," he told Kirk.

She ignored Kirk. "What has happened, Kang?"

"More Federation treachery. We are prisoners."

She was visibly terrified. The arm in Kang's hand trembled. "What will they do to us? I have heard of their atrocities… their death camps! They will torture us for our scientific and military information…"

Kirk addressed her. "You have some things to learn about us, madam." He turned to Galloway. "Detain them in the crew lounge. Program a food-synthesizer to accommodate our… guests. You will be well treated, Commander Kang."

"So I have seen," the Klingon said.

Kirk bowed and left, followed by Spock, McCoy and the still blazing Chekov. Unseen, unheard, the floating crystal hummed over their heads as they passed into the corridor.

"What *did* attack their ship, Jim?"

Kirk didn't answer. "Mr Spock, maintain Red Alert. Scan this sector for other ships. Run a full check on the colony. We've got to nail this down fast…"

"We know what happened!" Chekov cried. "That distress call—"

Spock, speaking to nobody in particular, said, "From their distant position, the Klingons could scarcely have attacked the colony at the time we received the call. Moreover, they were apparently attracted there themselves by a distress call."

"Lies!" Chekov cried, "They want to start a war by pretending we attacked it!"

Entering an elevator, Kirk glanced at his overwrought face. But McCoy was saying, "Chekov may be right. The Klingons *claim* to have honored the truce—but there have been incidents!… raids on our outposts…"

"We've never proved the Klingons committed them, Bones."

McCoy was flushed with unusual vehemence. "What proof do we need? We know what a Klingon is!"

He stormed out of the elevator. Kirk frowned, puzzled by his belligerence; and Spock, noting his uneasiness, said, "Our Log-tapes will indicate our innocence in the present situation Captain."

"Unfortunately, there is no guarantee they will be believed."

At the bridge deck, Chekov stalked to his post, his back stiff and stubbornly unrelenting. Kirk eyed him again before he asked for Uhura's report.

"Still unable to contact Starfleet Command, Captain. Outside communications blanketed."

"Keep at it, Lieutenant. We've got a diplomatic tiger by the tail."

He'd have liked authorization to take steps about the derelict Klingon ship. But at least he knew no lives were aboard it. He turned in his command chair. "Forward phasers locked and ready to fire, Mr Sulu."

"Aye, sir."

"Fire phasers," Kirk said.

On the screen, the crippled vessel flared into light—and vanished. So that was that. A diplomatic tiger, indeed.

"Lieutenant Uhura?"

"No contact with Starfleet yet, sir."

Spock looked up from his mounded viewer. "Sensor sweeps reveal no other ships within range, Captain."

Had the Klingons annihilated that colony after all? There was no telling. Not now. He swung to Uhura. "Keep trying, Lieutenant. Mr Sulu, set course seventeen mark four. Warp speed three."

"Warp three, sir."

In the crew lounge, Security guards and the "guests" were facing each other, each group wary, watchful, suspicious. Above them, all the crystal drifted. Kang, Mara beside him, used an empty space for restless pacing. "When I take this ship," he said, "I will have Kirk's head stuffed and hung on his cabin wall."

"They will kill us before we can act," she warned him.

"No! They wish to question us—learn our strength, our plans. They never will."

"We are forty," she protested. "Forty against four hundred."

One of Kang's men stepped forward. "Four thousand throats may be cut in one night by a running man."

"Patience," Kang said. "Vigilance. They will make their mistake. Capture of the *Enterprise* will give us knowledge to end this war quickly."

The crystal's unheard throb moved out of the lounge and into the corridor. When it reached the bridge, its throbbing faded. Uhura, abruptly irritated, jabbed at her controls. "Still no outside contact, sir! Carriers normal. Channels open. I don't understand! Could the Klingons be doing something—?"

The ship suddenly shuddered. Engine sound rose. Kirk whirled. "Mr Sulu?"

"Change of course, sir! Accelerating…" He struggled with switches. "Helm dead. Auxiliary navigation dead!"

Kirk braced himself against another shudder. "Override."

Sulu turned. "*Nothing* responds, Captain!"

"New course?"

"Nine-oh-two mark five…"

It would head the *Enterprise* out of the galaxy. Kirk hit a button. "Scotty—stop engines!"

The engine sound grew to a whining roar. On the intercom, Scott's voice was high with alarm. "? would if I could, sir! My controls have gone crazy! Something's—taken over…"

The bridge trembled under the rising roar. Scott shouted, "The engines, Captain! They've gone to warp nine—by themselves!"

Uhura's board was a dazzle of wildly flickering lights. Earphones fixed, she cried, "Captain! Reports from the lower decks! Emergency bulkheads closed! Almost four hundred crewmen trapped down there!"

Furious, Kirk exploded from his seat, racing for the elevator. The crystal followed him into the crew lounge. Kang was pleased with his information. "The bulk of your crew trapped? Your ship racing from the galaxy at wild speeds? Delightful! But how did I perform this sabotage, Kirk? My men are *here*."

Frigid with rage, Kirk spoke to Galloway. "Double security. Some Klingons may have beamed aboard, undetected. Mr Spock, get down to Engineering. Help Scott hammer things back to normal and release those crewmen!"

He eyed Kang. "Before I throw you in the brig, I owe you something!" He landed a clenched fist on Kang's jaw. The Klingon stumbled back into a console, his hand falling on a lever. It came loose, grew red—and changed into a sword. Kang, amazed, stared at it in unbelief. Then he hefted it. At the same moment, all the lounge's objects—ashtrays, vases, lamps, magazines, game equipment—went into glow, transforming into swords, shields, javelins, battle-axes. The Klingons rushed for the weapons.

Kirk's people reached for their phasers. But the phasers, too, went into glow. Then they turned into swords and maces.

Kang took a swordsman's stance. "You killed four hundred of my men, Captain Kirk. It is time that that debt be repaid…"

Kirk looked at the sword that had been a console lever. Molecular revolution. But explanation did nothing to solve the deadly mystery. His own phaser was a sword.

The Klingons attacked—and the fight was on. Out-numbered, the Security guards were forced to retreat. Kirk fenced expertly, and was deflecting a slash by Kang when he saw that Galloway was wounded. He battled his way to the lieutenant, got an arm around him and shoved him into an elevator. The doors whooshed shut in the faces of Kang and his men. They rang with the sound of beating, frustrated swords.

Kirk beeped Engineering on his intercom. "The Klingons are free, Scotty. And armed. They'll try to take the ship. How many men do we have?"

"I don't know, sir, but three hundred and ninety-two are trapped below decks."

"Deploy forces to protect your section and Auxiliary Control Center. Check the Armory—and try to free those trapped men."

"Doors and bulkheads won't budge, sir. We'll have to cut through—"

"Blow out bulkheads if you have to—we need numbers! Any luck regaining control of speed?"

"No, sir. She's a projectile—at warp nine. Don't ask me what's holding her together."

"Five-minute reports. Kirk out."

He went to Spock's station. "Full sensor scans of the ship, Mr Spock. Report any movements on the part of the Klingons. The Klingon Empire has maintained a dueling tradition. They think they can beat us with swords!"

Spock coolly examined the sword that had once been his phaser. "Neither the Klingon technology nor ours is capable of this, Captain. Instantaneous transmutation of matter. I doubt that they are responsible…"

"Other logical candidates?" Kirk demanded impatiently.

"None, Captain. But if they had such power, wouldn't they have created more effective weapons—and only for themselves?"

Kirk turned away. "Get below, Mr Sulu. Take command of forces protecting Engineering and Auxiliary Control."

Sulu rose and Chekov rose with him.

"As you were, Mr Chekov," Kirk said.

"No, sir! Let me go, too! I've got a personal score to settle with Klingons!"

"Maintain your post. This is no time for vendettas."

"Captain, I…"

"Sit down, Mister."

Chekov made a break for the elevator. As he reached it, Kirk grabbed his shoulder. Chekov wrenched away; and Spock, at Kirk's side, reached out an arm. Ducking under it, Chekov drew his sword. As he lifted it, Kirk and Spock paused, unwilling to risk a tangle that might hurt him.

"Don't try to stop me, Captain! I saw what they left of Piotr! I swore on his grave I would avenge his murder…" He backed into the elevator and its doors closed.

Sulu was staring. "What's Chekov's grudge against the Klingons? Who's—Piotr?"

"His brother," Kirk said. "Killed in a Klingon raid."

"His brother?" Sulu echoed blankly. "Chekov never had a brother! He's an only child."

It was Kirk's turn to stare. After a long moment, he said, "You are mistaken."

"I'm not, sir!" Sulu was very earnest. "I *know* he's an only child. It's why he requests his shore leaves on Earth—a good only son of his parents should visit them!"

"On your way to Engineering, Mr Sulu."

Sulu left—and a newly troubled Kirk hit his intercom. "Captain Kirk to Security. Find Mr Chekov and return him to the bridge."

Uhura swung around. "Captain—what could have made Chekov believe he had a brother?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant. But he does believe it—and now he wants revenge for a nonexistent loss."

On the *Enterprise* bridge, mystery was compounding itself, but in its crew lounge, clarification was in order.

A Klingon had projected the Starship's plan and arrangements on the viewer. "Layout and specifications of the ship, Commander Kang."

"Enemy numbers are the same as ours," Mara said. "We have a fighting balance."

"Then we will take this ship!" Kang spoke with a ferocious determination.

"A vessel that is racing toward the edge of the galaxy is weakening," his man said. "If the humans can't control it…"

Kang jabbed at the diagrams on the viewer. "These points we must capture! First, their Engineering section…"

McCoy was working feverishly to complete his treatment of Galloway's wound. As he worked, he could hear the moans of other slashed men waiting their turn at the table.

"Those—filthy butchers!" he muttered. "There are *rules*—even in *war*… you don't keep on hacking at a man after he's down!" He felt sick with impotent rage. He looked at an orderly who was wiping blood from a shoulder gash. "Where's that Numanol capsule?"

Haggard and worn by Sickbay's harrowing activity, the orderly turned, only to be confronted by wheeled stretchers bearing two more injured men. McCoy went to them. A glance told him their wounds were serious. As he bent over one of them, he spoke to the orderly. "I'm convinced now the only good Klingon is a dead one," he said.

Scott was inclined to agree with him. All attempts to release the cut-off crewmen had failed. Phaser beams couldn't cut through the

bulkheads. Their metal's structure had changed. He hit an intercom button to make his report

"What about the Armory?" Kirk said.

"I'm there now, Captain. You never saw such a collection of antiques in your life…"

The Armory had turned into a medieval weapons' Wonderland. Crossbows, hatchets, knives, broadswords…

"Get back to Engineering," Kirk said. "Keep trying to reestablish engine control. And make some phasers—fast."

"Aye, sir."

He was about to leave when he spotted a sharply two-edged weapon in the rack. He removed it, fondling it. "A claymore!" Exchanging it for the sword at his waist, he murmured, "Ah, you're a beauty, aren't you?"

As he strutted out of the Armory, reinforced by Scotland's history of claymore triumphs, Spock was computing the opposing forces at an exact thirty-eight. He lifted his head from his computer. "The Klingons occupy Deck Six and starboard Deck Seven, Captain. We control all sections above." He bent to his viewer again, becoming suddenly intent. "Most curious," he said.

"What?" Kirk said.

"There appear to be more energy units aboard than can be accounted for by the presence of the *Enterprise* crew plus the Klingons. A considerable discrepancy."

"Could some more of Kang's crew have beamed aboard?"

"Their ship was thoroughly vacated, Captain." He flipped a switch. "I shall compensate for the human and Klingon readings."

The crystal had found Engineering. It hovered high in the air, as unseen as it was unheard.

Scotty, descending a ladder, stepped down into the lower level of his section. "Any signs of those treacherous devils, Mr Sulu?"

"All clear, Mr Scott."

Klingons, moving into the upper level, leaped down to the attack. The surprised humans fell back. But Scott was inspired by his claymore's tradition. He felled a Klingon with its haft; and then realizing that his species was hopelessly outnumbered, darted through a door into the corridor. Sulu joined him, downing the two Klingons who followed him.

Scott was breathless. "I don't know how many of these creatures are around. We'll split up here. Maybe… one of us… can make it back to the bridge."

Inside Engineering, the rest of the crew were being shoved against a wall. As they were disarmed, a jubilant Kang strode in, Mara at his side.

It was hard going, trying to get back to the bridge. Klingons seemed to be everywhere. The canny Scott finally reconciled national glory with common sense. He hid in a lavatory. So he was in no position to see Spock zero in on an unusual but steady beeping.

"An alien life force, Captain. A single entity. I am unable to ascertain its location." He flicked a switch. "Readings diverted to the library computer for analysis…"

Kirk, beside him, said, "We have to make contact… find out what it wants!"

Calmer than custard, Spock said, "The computer report, Captain…"

There was a click—and the computer voice said, "Alien life force on board is composed of pure energy. Type unknown. Actions indicate intelligence and purpose."

"What purpose?" Spock said.

The metallic computer voice said, "Insufficient data for further analysis."

The computer's stark admission of inadequacy fired Kirk into new, creative thought. Out of his human memory banks he made connections. "A brother that never existed," he said. "A phantom colony—fancied distress calls! The illusion that phasers are swords! Do you begin to sense a pattern, Mr Spock?"

Spock, loyal to facts, looked up. "If the alien has caused these phenomena, it is apparently able to manipulate matter and minds."

"Now it's controlling the *Enterprise*—taking us out of the galaxy! *Why?*"

"I am constrained to point out, Captain, that as minds are evidently being influenced, we cannot know that our own memories at this moment are accurate."

Kirk faced his sole alternative. "We've got to talk to Kang and bury the hatchet!"

"An appropriate choice of terms, sir. However, once blood has been drawn, it is notoriously difficult to arrange a truce with Klingons…"

"A *truce?*"

It was McCoy—an outraged, infuriated McCoy. His white surgical uniform was blood-spattered. "I've got seven men down in Sickbay—some of them dying—*atrocities* committed on their persons! And you can talk of making peace with those fiends? They'd jump us the minute our backs were turned! We know what Klingons do to prisoners! Slave labor, death planets—experiments!"

Kirk had never seen Bones so angry. "McCoy—" he began.

McCoy rushed on. "Even while you're talking, the Klingons are planning attacks! This is a fight to the death—and we'd better start trying to win it!"

"We are trying to end it, Doctor." Spock's voice was more than usually quiet. "There is an alien aboard which may have created this situation…"

McCoy glared at him. "Who *cares* what started it! We're in it! Those murderers! Let's wipe out every one of them!"

"Bones, the alien is the enemy we have to wipe out—"

Uhura cut in. "Sickbay calling, Doctor. There are more wounded men requiring your attention."

McCoy wheeled, starting back to the elevator. Then he turned again to Kirk and Spock. "How many men have to die before you begin acting like military men instead of damn fools?" The elevator doors closed on his bleakly hopeless face. Kirk looked at Spock. The Vulcan murmured, "Extraordinary."

Kang was on the intercom. Kirk spoke quickly. "There's something important we must discuss…"

Vindictive and triumphant, Kang's voice said, "I have captured your Engineering section! I now control this ship's power and life support systems." At Engineering's intercom he nodded to Mara. She moved a series of switches and Kang spoke again into the intercom.

"I have deprived all areas of life support except our own. You will die… of suffocation… in the icy cold of space…"

On the bridge, lights were dimming. Panels were going dark.

Kirk walked slowly over to Sulu's station. "Mr Sulu, get down to Emergency Manual Control. Try to protect life support circuits and activate auxiliary power…"

"Aye, Captain." But as Sulu approached the elevator, Scott burst out of it. He barely acknowledged the helmsman's smile of relief at his safety. Kirk went to him. "Scotty! I'm glad you escaped…"

Scott was shaking. "Chekov was right, Captain! We *should've* left those slant-eyed goons in the Transporter! That's right where they belong—in nonexistence! Now they can study the *Enterprise*—add our technology to theirs—change the balance of power!" He lurched at Kirk, not in attack but in a blind misery that was seeking; some shred of comfort. "You've jeopardized the Federation!"

The charge was a cry of anguish. "Scotty…"

Spock had joined them. "Mr Scott, calm yourself," he said.

Scott pulled back. For one terrible moment, Kirk feared he was going to spit at Spock, such aversion showed in his face. "Keep your Vulcan hands off me! Just stay away! Your 'feelings' might get hurt, you green-blooded, halfbreed freak!"

Kirk didn't believe his ears. Appalled, he stared at Scott. Then Spock made his icy retort. "Let me say that I have not enjoyed serving with humans. I find their illogical and foolish emotions a constant irritant."

"So transfer out!" Scott shouted.

Spock moved toward Scott. He loomed darkly formidable over him—and Scott, frightened, took a clumsy punch at him. Kirk grabbed their arms; but Spock, twisting easily free, seemed about to use his great strength in an upsurge of rage he couldn't govern. Kirk tried again; and yanking them apart, crashed back into his command chair. "Spock! Scotty! Stow it!" He pinned them, panting. "*What's happening to us! What are we saying to each other?*"

Spock pushed Kirk away. Kirk braced himself, ready for some ultimate disaster. But nothing happened. Spock was himself again, perhaps a little more impassive than usual.

"Fascinating," he said to Kirk. "A result of stress, Captain?"

"We've been under stress before! It hasn't set us at each other's throats!" Scott had started forward again and Kirk pushed him back.

"This is a *war!*" Scott yelled.

"There isn't any war…" Kirk paused, the sound of his own words in his ears. "Or—*is* there?"

"Have we forgotten how to defend ourselves?" Scott cried.

"Shut up, Scotty." Kirk paced at the back of his command chair, frowning as he put his two's together. "What *is* happening to us? We're trained to think in other terms—than war! We're trained to fight its causes whenever possible! So why are we reacting like savages?" The two's were adding up. He swung around to his men. "There are two forces on this ship, armed equally. Has—a

war been *staged* for us? A war complete with weapons, grievances, patriotic drumbeats?" He turned on Scott. "Even race hatred!"

Spock had nodded. "Recent events *would* seem directed to a magnification of basic human and Klingon hostilities. Apparently, it is by design that we fight. We seem to be pawns."

"In what game?" Kirk said. "Whose game? What are the rules?"

"It is most urgent," Spock said, "that we locate the alien entity, determine its motives—and some means of halting its activities."

Scott's startled thoughts had been tumbling around in his head. He was quieter now—and guilt-stricken. He spoke to Spock. "Without sensors, sir? All our power down? The thing can pass through walls. It could be anywhere."

Kirk hit his intercom. "Mr Sulu, report!"

Sulu was at the Jeffries tube, peering up into it. "No good, Captain. Circuits are in but systems aren't responding." As he spoke, the tube's complex instruments flickered with light and settled down to a steady pattern. He heard Kirk say, "Are we getting something?"

"Aye, sir. Power and life support restored—remotes on standby…"

"Good work!" Kirk told him.

"But Captain—*I didn't do it!* Everything just came on by itself!"

Kirk thought, "Well, this is a gift horse I don't look too close in the mouth of." He said, "All right, Mr Sulu. Get back to Manual Control. Kirk out."

The bridge lights had come back to normal. Panels had resumed their humming. Spock turned. "Sensors operating again, Captain."

"Start scanning, Mr Spock. Look for the alien."

In Engineering, a puzzled Mara was studying lights on a large board. "Their life support systems have resumed and are holding steady," she told Kang.

"Cause them to.be unsteady," he said.

"They appear to be controlled from another location." For the first time her voice was uncertain. "I'm also unable to affect the ship's course—to return to our Empire."

"Some trick of Kirk's? Has he bypassed these circuits? What power is it that supports our battle, yet starves our victory? Interrupt power at their main life support couplings. Where are they?"

She looked at the diagrams on the viewer. "They are on this deck." At Kang's nod, she spoke to a Klingon. "Come with me."

Above them in the bridge, Spock had tensed. He whirled to Kirk. "Alien detected, Captain! In the Engineering level, near reactor number three!"

Kirk leaped from his chair. "Let's go!"

Mara, the Klingon behind her, was rushing down a corridor that led to the couplings. As they passed an alcove, Chekov, sword drawn, moved out of it, his face hate-filled. Two well-aimed slashes disposed of the Klingon. Mara was turning to run when Chekov grabbed her and whirled her around. She fought well; but Chekov blocked her karate blow. He pinned her back against the wall, sword at her throat. It was a lovely throat. Chekov's manner changed. He eyed her with an ugly speculation, grinning. "No, you don't die—yet," he said. "You're not human but you're beautiful, aren't you?" His grip on her tightened. "Just how human *are* you?"

She pushed at him, struggling against the grip. Chekov placed his hand over her mouth and was pressing her into the alcove when Kirk and Spock raced out of the elevator. Assault was the last thing on their minds. Hearing Mara's muffled scream, they stared at each other. Then they broke into a run, rounded a comer —and stopped dead in their tracks at what they saw.

"Chekov!"

Chekov wheeled to face Kirk, a wild beast deprived of its prey. Mara's garment was ripped from her shoulders. Chekov spun her away. She hit a wall and dropped. He tried to dodge Kirk and failed. Kirk seized him, slapping his face forehand, backhand. Chekov sobbed; and raising his sword, made a swipe at Kirk. He was disarmed and i felled with a punch. Beside himself with fury, Kirk struck him again.

Spock put a hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Captain… he is not responsible…"

Mara, crouched on the deck, was trying to pull her torn clothes together. Kirk went to her. "Listen to me," he said. "There's an alien entity aboard this ship. It's forcing us to fight. We don't know its motives—we're trying to find out. Will you help us? Will you take me to Kang… a temporary truce! That's all I ask!"

Mingled fear and hate blazed from her eyes. Kirk turned his back on her. "Bring her, Spock." He moved to the weeping Chekov and lifted him gently in his arms. Was this what was in store for all of them? Hatred, violence wherever they turned?

McCoy was redressing Galloway's wound when Kirk carried Chekov into Sickbay. He looked up, taking them all in, Kirk, the still sobbing Chekov clinging to him, a disheveled Mara, closely followed by Spock. Shaking his head, he left Galloway and hurried to help Kirk place Chekov on an exam table. He applied a device to the new patient's head.

"Brainwaves show almost paranoid mania. What happened, Jim?"

"He's—lost control—useless as a fighter." He turned to the door. "Come on, Spock…"

McCoy stopped him with a hand on his arm. He seemed somewhat calmer himself but his tired face was bewildered. "*Jim*—Galloway's heart wound has almost entirely healed! The same with the other casualties. Sword wounds… into vital organs—massive trauma, shock—and they're all healing at a fantastic rate!"

Spock spoke. "The entity would appear to want us alive."

"? Why?" Kirk said. "So we can fight and fight—and always come back for more? Some kind of bloody Colosseum? What next? The roar of crowds?"

Galloway was listening. And he was buying none of it. His jaw hardened. He wanted out from Sickbay and for only one reason—another crack at the Klingons.

Kirk felt the lieutenant's hostility like a tangible thing. "Spock, let's find that alien!" He looked at Mara. "You come along. Maybe we can prove to you that it exists!"

In the corridor, Spock unlimbered his tricorder. He led the way, searching cautiously, the tricorder first aimed one way, then another. When they reached a second intersection, Spock paused, gesturing to his left. They turned the corner—and they all heard the crystal's faint humming. Without speaking, Spock signaled them to look up to the right side of the corridor. The crystal was floating there, brighter than it had ever been.

Kirk shot a significant look at Mara. Now that she was forced to believe, she was staring at the thing's swirling red.

"What is it?" Kirk said.

"Totally unfamiliar, Captain."

Kirk approached the crystal. "What do you want? Why are you doing all this?" It hovered silently, persistent.

Kirk, close to blowing his stack, shouted, "*What do you want?*"

The thing glowed still brighter, bobbing slightly. Spock, noting the increased glow, whirled at a sound. Galloway, still bandaged,

was coming down the corridor, a little weak but grimly determined. He hefted his sword—and started to push past them as though he didn't see them.

"Lieutenant Galloway!" Kirk cried. "What are you doing here? Did the Doctor release you?"

"I'm releasing myself!"

First, Chekov's insubordination. Now this one. It took all Kirk's strength to remember that the crystal was in the business of war, dissension and rule-breaking.

"Go back to Sickbay," he said.

"Not on your life! I'm fit and ready for action!" He shook Kirk's hand from his arm. "The Klingons nearly put me away for good! I'm going to get me some scalps…"

"I order you!" Kirk said.

"I've got my orders! I'm obeying orders! To Kill Klingons! It's them or us, isn't it?"

The crystal had bobbed over Galloway's head. Spock, looking up, saw it bob as Galloway pushed past him, heading for an elevator. He tagged the man with a neck pinch. Kirk saw Galloway slump, unconscious, to the deck. Spock's eyes were already back on the crystal. Its glow had faded.

"Most interesting," Spock said.

His eyes returned to Kirk. "During Mr Galloway's emotional outburst—his expressions of hatred and lust for vengeance—the alien's life-energy level *increased*. When the lieutenant became unconscious, the alien *lost* energy."

"A being that subsists on the emotions of others?" Kirk said.

"Such creatures are not unknown, Captain. I refer you to the Drella of Alpha Cannae five—energy creatures who are nourished by the cooperation of love they feel for one another." He had neared the crystal and was looking up at it, composed and calm. "This creature appears to be strengthened by mental radiations of hostility, by violent intentions…"

"It feeds—on hate!" Complete illumination dawned on Kirk.

"Yes, to put it simply, Captain. And it has acted as a catalyst to create this situation in order to satisfy that need. It has drawn fighting forces together, supplied crude weapons to promote the most violent mode of conflict. It has spurred racial animosities—"

"And kept numbers and resources balanced to maintain a stable state of violence! Spock, it's got to have a vulnerable area. It's got to be stopped!"

"Then all hostile attitudes on board must be eliminated, sir. The fighting must end—and soon."

Kirk nodded. "I agree. Otherwise, we'll be a doom ship—traveling forever between galaxies… filled with bloodlust… eternal warfare! Kang *has* to listen—we've got to pool our knowledge to get rid of that thing!"

The crystal was showing agitation, bobbing as though angry that its secret was known. Now, as Kirk strode to an intercom, it moved toward him, throbbing loudly. For a moment Kirk wavered. Then he walked on. The crystal, its hum furious, approached Mara. Suddenly, without warning, she hurled herself at Kirk, biting, scratching, pushing him away from the intercom. Spock lifted her from Kirk, quietly pinning her arms to her sides.

Kirk hit all buttons. "Kang! This is Kirk! Kang! *Kang!*"

Mara shrieked, "Commander! It's a trick! They are located—"

Spock's steel hand went over her mouth. At the intercom, Kirk hit the buttons again. "*Kang!*" It was hopeless. The Klingon wouldn't answer.

"The alien is affecting his mind, Captain. Soon it will grow so powerful that none of us will be able to resist it."

The intercom beeped and Kirk hit it fast—fast and hopefully. "Kirk here!"

"Scotty, sir. The ship's dilithium crystals are deteriorating. We can't stop the process…"

Kirk struck the wall with his fist. "Time factor, Scotty?"

"In twelve minutes we'll be totally without engine power, sir."

"Do everything you can. Kirk out."

The crystal stopped bobbing. It glowed brilliantly, back in the driver's seat. As they watched it, it vanished through a wall. Kirk spoke to Mara. "So we drift forever… with only hatred and bloodshed aboard. Now do you believe?"

Her strained eyes stared into his. But she made no answer.

The dilithium crystals were still losing power. Spock, rallying all his scientific know-how, toured the bridge, examining panels. Finally, he broke the bad news to Kirk. There was nothing to be done to halt the crystals' decay.

"We have nine minutes and fifty-seven seconds before power zero," he said. "But there is a logical alternative, Captain." He was looking at Mara, his face speculative. "Kang's wife, after all, is our prisoner. A threat made to him…"

"That's something the Klingons would understand," Scott urged.

Mara had flinched, remembering the unspeakable atrocities said to be visited on Klingon prisoners by their human captors. Kirk saw her remembering them. Though the idea of using her to threaten Kang just might result in a productive discussion with him, it revolted him. On the other hand, peace between them was the sole hope now. After a long, painful moment, he said, "You're right, Mr Spock."

He flicked on his intercom. This was going to be difficult. He harshened his voice. "Kang. Kang! This is Captain Kirk. I know you can hear me… Don't cut me off! *We have Mara—your wife!*"

At Engineering's intercom, Kang was listening. Kirk's voice went on. "We talk truce *now*—or she dies. Reply!"

Kang was silent.

"She has five seconds to live, Kang! Reply!"

The answer came. "She is a victim of war, Captain. She understands." Kang flicked off the intercom, his dark emotion visible to his men. He turned to them. "When we get Kirk, he is mine," he said.

The last card had been played. Kirk looked at Mara. She had stiffened, her head held high, proud, a queen awaiting death. He pointed to a seat. "Sit over there and keep out of our way. Lieutenant Uhura, guard her."

She didn't understand. "? you're… not going to…?"

"The Federation doesn't kill or mistreat its prisoners. You've heard fables, propaganda." He looked away from her as though he'd forgotten her existence. "How much time now, Mr Spock?"

"Eight minutes and forty-two seconds, sir."

Instead of taking a seat, Mara had gone to the panel Spock was studying. Reading it, she realized the dilithium situation. Near her, Uhura watched her as she turned in shocked belief. "So it was no trick…" she said, bewildered.

Scott spoke. "The alien has done all this. We are in its power. Our people—and yours."

Kirk rose from his chair. "We wanted only to end the fighting to save us all," he told her.

Her relief had bred a need to explain. "We have always fought, Captain Kirk. We must. We are hunters, tracking and taking what we need. There are poor planets in the Klingon systems. We must push outward to survive."

"Another way to survive is mutual trust, Mara. Mutual trust and mutual help."

"I will help you now," she said.

He'd hoped to no point too many times to feel anything but skepticism. "How?" he said.

"I will take you to Kang. I will add my plea to yours."

Scott's suspicion found voice. "Captain—I wouldn't trust her…"

"We can't get past the Klingon defenses in time now, anyway—" Kirk paused. "Unless…" He whirled to Spock. "*Spock! Intra*ship beaming! From one part of the ship to another! Is it possible?"

"It has rarely been done, sir, because of the great danger involved. Pinpoint accuracy is needed. If the Transportee should materialize within any solid object—a wall or deck…"

"Prepare the Transporter," Kirk said.

"Mr Scott, please help me with the Main Transporter Board." Spock moved to a panel but Scott hesitated, worried.

"Even if it works, Captain, she may be leading you into a trap!"

"We're all in a trap, Scotty. And this is our only way out of it."

"We'll go with you, sir…"

"That would start the final battle." Kirk took a long-searching look at Mara. "I believe her."

Scott took one for himself. He believed her, too. "Aye, sir," he said.

Mara entered the elevator. Following her, Kirk said, "We'll wait for your signal." As the doors closed, Scott thoughtfully fingered his sword. "But she can't guarantee that Kang will listen. Right, Mr Spock?"

But Spock was intent on the Main Transporter Board. "No one can guarantee another's actions, Mr Scott."

The Transporter Room was empty. Entering it, Kirk deliberately removed his sword; and, disarmed, placed the weapon on the console. Mara smiled at him. Spock's voice spoke from the intercom. "Your automatic setting is laid in, Captain. When the Transporter is energized, you will have eight seconds to get to the pads."

The console was flickering with lights. As Kirk pressed a button, it beeped to every second that passed. Its hum rose and Kirk said, "I hope your computations are correct, Mr Spock."

"You will know in five point two seconds, Captain."

Kirk and Mara went quickly into position on the platform. There were eight more beeps from the console before they shimmered out.

At their appearance in Engineering, the startled Kang exploded to his feet. "*Mara!* You are alive!… and you bring us a prize!" He turned, shouting, "*Guards!*"

Swords drawn, his men ringed Kirk.

"Kang—wait!" Mara cried. "He has. come alone—unarmed! *He must talk to you!*"

"Brave Captain. What about?" Kang swung to his men. "Kill him."

Mara rushed into place before Kirk. "*No!* You must listen! There is great danger to us all!"

Kang paused—and Kirk moved her aside, unwilling to allow her shield to him. "Before you start killing," he said, "give me one minute to speak!"

Kang ignored him. He spoke to Mara. "What have they done to you? How have they affected your mind?" Then he spotted her torn garment, her bruised shoulder. His slanted eyes went icy. "Ah, I see why this human beast did not kill you…"

She flashed into action. She seized a sword and tossed it to Kirk. He caught it as Kang launched himself headlong into attack. Defending himself, he retreated before another fierce slash. Mara, held by a Klingon, was struggling, agonized by the turn events had taken.

"They didn't harm me! Kang, listen to Kirk!"

Kang backed away for another onrush. "With his death, we win!"

"Nobody wins!" Kirk shouted. "Have any of your men died?" He broke into sudden attack but only to bring himself closer to Kang. "*Listen! We can't be killed—any of us! There's an alien aboard this ship that needs us alive!*"

Kang shoved him away only to come back with another vicious onslaught.

"You *fool!*" Mara screamed.

From behind them all, the Transporter humming sounded. Spock, McCoy, Sulu and the *Enterprise* forces sparkled into shape and substance. Kang's men rushed forward, swords aimed. The Security guards, led by Sulu who uttered a yell that might have been "Banzai!" closed with them.

Kirk, downing a Klingon with a hard right to the jaw, reached Kang—and grabbed him. Nose to nose, he shouted, "*Listen* to me! Let me *prove* what I say!"

Kang wrenched free, his sword up for the lethal downsweep. Kirk parried the blow in mid-descent. Mara, huddled against a wall,

covered her face with her hands, despairing. Kang came back with another vicious slash. As Kirk ducked it, he heard the triumphant throbbing. He looked up. The crystal—above their heads, brighter than he'd ever seen it—was casting its virulent red light on Kang's face.

The sight was all that he needed. He pushed Kang back, pinning him, and whirled him around to face their common enemy.

"LOOK! *Up there!*"

Kang looked. He shot a glance at Kirk—but the real meaning of what he'd seen didn't get through to him.

The fight went on, interminably. Sulu plunged his sword into an opponent's chest. The Klingon staggered, pawing at the wound. Then he rallied. He drove so straight for Sulu's heart that the *Enterprise* helmsman barely managed to escape the thrust.

Kang, his eyes on the crystal, was just beginning to get the lay of the land. Kirk pressed his advantage. "? for the rest of our lives, Kang! For a thousand lifetimes—fighting, this insane violence! That alien over our heads will control us forever!"

The crystal throbbed loudly. Kirk himself felt the heat of its bloody radiance. But Kang still twisted, snarling, avid for killing. Kirk smashed the sword that had reappeared in his hand. He struck it furiously against a bulkhead. It broke. Kang stared at him. Then he stepped forward, his own weapon upraised. Kirk stood his ground.

"Come on! In the brain, the heart—it doesn't matter, Kang! *I won't stay dead!* Next time the thing will see to it that I kill you. And you won't stay dead! The good old game of war—mindless pawn against mindless pawn! While something somewhere sits back and laughs… laughs fit to kill, Kang—and starts it all over again…"

The sword was at his throat.

"Jim—*jump him!*" McCoy shouted.

Spock spoke out of his wise Vulcan heritage. "Those who hate and fight must stop themselves, Doctor—or it is not stopped."

Mara had flung herself at Kang's feet. "I'm your wife—a Klingon! Would I lie for them? Listen to Kirk. He is telling the truth!"

"Then be a pawn!" Kirk said. "A toy—the good soldier who never asks questions!"

Kang looked up at the excitedly throbbing crystal. Very slowly, his hand relaxed on the sword. It dropped to the deck.

"Klingons," he told the crystal, "kill for their *own* purposes." He turned to his men, shouting. "Cease hostilities! At rest!"

They were puzzled by the order—but they obeyed. Kang yanked a Klingon away from a downed Security man. "*At rest! At rest!* You heard the order!"

Through the open door they could all hear the clashing sounds of continuing battle in other parts of the ship. "*All* fighting must be stopped, Captain, if the alien is to be weakened before our fuel is gone."

Kang had lifted Mara to her feet. They joined Kirk at the intercom as he activated it, Kang still suspicious.

"Lieutenant Uhura, put me on shipwide intercom…"

"Ready, Captain."

"Attention, all hands! A truce is ordered… the fighting is over! Regroup and lay down weapons." He stepped back, speaking urgently. "Kang! Your turn at the intercom…"

The Klingon hesitated, reluctant. He couldn't resist a push at Kirk as he moved to the intercom. "This is Kang. Cease hostilities. Disarm."

The crystal was bobbing wildly with anger; but its throbbing had lessened and its redness was dimmer. "The cessation of violence appears to have weakened the alien," Spock said. "I suggest that good spirits might prove to be an effective weapon."

Kirk nodded. A hard smile on his lips, he addressed the crystal. "Get off my ship!" The thing retreated, still bobbing. "You're powerless here. You're a dead duck. We know all about you—and we don't want to play your game anymore."

The throbbing was fainter. Spock was right. What the invader needed was a cheerful scorn. Kirk looked up at it. "Maybe there are others' like you still around. Maybe you've caused a lot of suffering—a lot of history. That's all over. We'll be on guard… we'll be ready for you. Now butt out!" He laughed at the crystal. "Haul it!"

McCoy waved a contemptuous hand. "Get out, already!" he yelled.

As the throbbing faded, Kirk was amazed to hear a hoarse chuckle from Kang. Then he laughed as though he weren't used to it. His gusto grew. "Out!" he shouted at the crystal. "We need no urging to hate humans!" He laughed harder at Spock's irritated glance. "But for the present—only fools fight in a burning house."

Guffawing, he rattled Kirk's teeth with a sadistic whack on the back. McCoy nudged Spock. After a moment, the Vulcan thumbed

his nose at the crystal. "You will please leave," he said.

The red was now a dull flicker. They all watched it, laughing. Suddenly the crystal vanished through a bulkhead. Floating in space outside the Starship, it flared up and winked out.

The forced laughter had come hard. Kirk's relief from hours of nervous strain overwhelmed him so that he wasn't surprised to see that swords and shields had disappeared. Spock and McCoy discovered their phasers in place. McCoy made a point of drawing his; and Kang, noting the weapon, went right on chuckling. Caution—it was how things were between the Federation and his Klingon Empire.

Uhura's voice spoke. "Captain, jettisoning of fuel has stopped. The trapped crewmen are free. All systems returning to normal."

"Carry on, Lieutenant. Mr Sulu, resume your post Set course for —well, set it for any old star in the galaxy!"

As Sulu left, Kirk nearly knocked Kang from his feet with a mighty thump on the back. Kang spun around, blood in his eye— and Kirk grinned at him. "*Friends!*" he said.

The command chair was a place again where a man could relax. For a moment, anyway. Kirk leaned back in his seat.

"Ahead, Mr Sulu. Warp one." He turned to Kang and Mara. "We'll reach a neutral planet by tomorrow. You'll be dropped there. No war, this time."

He eyed Mara. A real woman, that one. If she hadn't been Kang's wife… if there had been time. Ah well, no man could accommodate all opportunities…

Kang was saying, "Why do you humans revere peace? It is the weakling's way. There's a galaxy to be taken, Kirk, with all its riches!"

Spock looked up. "Two animals may fight over a bone, sir—or they can pool their abilities, hunt together more efficiently and share justly. Curiously, it works out about the same."

Kang turned. "One animal must trust the other animal."

"Agreed," Kirk said. "Cooperate… or fight uselessly throughout eternity. A universal rule you Klingons had better learn." He paused. "*We* did."

Had it got through? Maybe. At any rate, Kang's face seemed unusually thoughtful.

PLATO'S STEPCHILDREN

(Meyer Dolinsky)

The planet was uncharted; but the sensors of the *Enterprise*, in orbit around it, had detected mineral and chemical riches under its rugged, mountainous surface. Spock looked up from his viewer to say briefly, "Kironide deposits, too, Captain."

"Record coordinates," Kirk told him.

Uhura turned. "Mr Spock, what *is* kironide?"

"A particularly potent and long-lasting source of power, Lieutenant—very rare."

She was about to question him further when her board's lights flashed. Surprise still on her face, she reported to Kirk. "A distress signal's coming in, Captain."

It *was* disconcerting news. An uncharted planet, apparently uninhabited—and an SOS call. Kirk said, "Let's have it. Put it on audio, Lieutenant."

A woman's voice, amplified by the bridge's audio system, was loud enough for everyone to hear.

"My spouse is dying. We need a physician immediately. The situation is urgent. If there's a physician hearing this, we need you. Please make contact. My spouse is dying…"

Kirk said, "I thought there was no life down there, Mr Spock."

"The sensors still read negative, sir."

But the voice was still with them. "Please help us. We are in desperate need of a physician. My spouse is dying. Acknowledge… acknowledge… please…"

"Mr Spock, life forms or no life forms, that distress call sounds authentic." Kirk got up and strode to Uhura's station. "Lieutenant, acknowledge and report that we're beaming down at once. Notify Dr McCoy to meet us in the Transporter Room."

Medikit in hand, McCoy materialized with Kirk and Spock in front of a colonnaded promenade. At first glance, there seemed to be no one around. Then Kirk spotted movement at the rear of a marble column. A dwarf, clearly frightened and wearing a short

Greek robe that left one misshapen shoulder bare, broke from behind the column and scuttled to them.

"Are you from the spaceship *Enterprise?*"

Kirk looked down at him for a moment before he spoke. "That's right."

"No offense," the dwarf said hastily. He bowed low. "Alexander… at your service. I sing, I dance, I play all variety of games and I'm a good loser. A very good loser. And I try, I try very hard. Please bear that in mind."

It was an extraordinary speech. The *Enterprise* men looked at each other, nonplussed, and the dwarf said, "Now, if you'll accompany me…"

"Who inhabits this planet?" Kirk said.

The little creature bowed again. "Platonians. You've never heard of us. Our home star is Sahndara. Millennia ago, just before it novaed, we got off. Our leader liked Plato's ideas—Plato—Platonians, see? In fact, Parmen, our present philosopher-king, calls us Plato's children. Some of us think we're more like stepchildren." He gave a nervous little laugh. "Now, please—they're waiting for you…"

He wheeled around and hurried ahead of them like a mechanical doll set suddenly into motion.

The *Enterprise* three hesitated. Then, curious but a little uneasy, they followed him.

Whoever McCoy's prospective patient was, he had done very well for himself. The dwarf ushered them into a stately, atrium-like court pillared by marble. In the center of the place, a nymph of marble dripped water from an urn into a reflecting pool. There was a game board on the left, flanked by benches, the pieces it held geometrically shaped into balls, pyramids, cylinders and cubes. Two tall robed men stood near a couch where another one reclined, his legs covered. Kirk saw a spasm of pain convulse his face. It seemed to deeply concern the dark, beautiful woman who was stooping over him. She touched his bald head gently before she hurried forward to greet the newcomers.

"Parmen and I welcome you to our Republic," she said. "I am Philana, his wife. Who among you is the physician?"

So the Platonians' philosopher-king was the patient. The startled McCoy said, "I am. What is the problem?"

She gestured to the couch. "You must do something…"

Following her, McCoy removed the covering from his patient's legs. An infection had swollen the left one almost to the knee.

"What happened to that leg?" he said.

With a sick man's irritation, Parmen snapped, "What do you suppose? I scratched it!"

"I don't understand," McCoy said. "Why wasn't this attended to immediately?"

"Sheer ignorance. Is there anything you can do?"

The question put McCoy on guard. "We're certainly going to try. The infection is massive. Let me give you a shot to ease the pain."

McCoy opened his medikit; but before he so much as touched his hypo, it rose from the kit and sailing through the air, hovered for a moment. Kirk and Spock were looking up at it in amazement when Parmen said, "Where?"

McCoy came out of his shock. "Your arm," he said.

The hypo alighted on Parmen's upper arm, delivered the shot and replaced itself in the medikit. The sick man noted McCoy's expression. "Sorry, didn't mean to take matters out of your hands," he said. "But I can't risk any further contamination."

Watching, the dwarf touched Philana's white robe. "Mistress, they've come to help. They deserve better than to die."

Alexander had spoken so softly that Kirk didn't hear the plea. But what he saw was enough. The little man's mouth was forced open. His fist clenched and was shoved into the open mouth. Then his teeth were snapped back to bite into his knuckles.

"Alexander, you talk too much," Philana said.

The fist was left in the mouth. Over it the dwarf's tormented eyes met Kirk's.

"What is your prognosis, Doctor?"

Parmen barely managed to utter the words. His breath was coming in heavy pants and he was perspiring profusely. But McCoy, scanning him with his tricorder, had not forgotten the hypo episode. "It will be better," he said, "if I handle my instruments myself without any help from you."

His patient stifled a cry of agony. McCoy took another closer reading of his tricorder's dials. As Parmen moaned, turning on his side, Kirk approached the couch. "I don't understand how a simple scratch could get this serious," he said to McCoy.

The *Enterprise* surgeon stepped to one side. "Neither do I. But it has. And how do I knock out an infection with a tricorder that has

no information on Platonian bacteria? All I can do—and it's going to take time—is match his bugs with a known strain and *hope*."

"Look at the game board," Kirk said.

The dwarf's fist had been removed from his mouth. It had been removed so that he could play a game with one of the robed academician-guests. Kirk and McCoy saw Alexander move a piece; but his opponent's piece made its countermove by itself.

"Your pyramid is in jeopardy, Eraclitus," Alexander said.

A cube rose into the air and descended into another position. "Aha! It isn't now!" Eraclitus laughed. "I won the game."

Kirk went to Philana. "This psychokinetic power of yours is unique. How long have you possessed it?"

"Two and a half millennia—ever since our arrival here on Platonius."

Spock joined them. "How is the power transmitted?" he asked.

"Brain waves," she told him.

"Do these waves cease when you're asleep?"

"No, not if they're embedded in the unconscious," she said.

"How do dreams affect them?" Kirk said.

Her anxious face moved in a coldly formal smile. "Our sleep is dreamless."

McCoy, gathering chemicals from his kit, was mixing them in a vial. Delirium's symptoms were beginning to show in the twisting, fevered Parmen. Frustrated and disturbed, McCoy called to Philana. "*Why don't you have doctors? Medicine?*"

"We've had no pressing need for the medical arts, Doctor. While still on Sahndara, we instituted a mass eugenics program. We're the result. Pared down to a population of thirty-eight, we're perfect for our Utopia. Overemotionality and concern with family have been eliminated. We're bred for contemplation, self-reliance and longevity." She paused. "How old would you say I am, gentlemen? Don't be afraid. I'm not vain."

"Thirty-five," Spock said.

"That old? I… I stopped aging at thirty. Anyway, you missed by two thousand years. I am two thousand, three hundred years old. We married very young, Parmen and I. I was only one seventeen, he was one twenty-eight. You see, we scarcely have to move any more, let alone work."

Kirk nodded. "That's why you have no resistance."

"True," she said. "A break in the skin or a cut can be fatal." She looked over at the couch. "We went for a stroll in the moonlight—something we seldom do—and my spouse fell…"

Parmen gave a cry. She hurried away from them to watch McCoy. He was working fast, pulling his mixed chemicals into the hypo. Suddenly a marble bust of Socrates fell from its pedestal, and the game board, along with its geometric pieces, lifted up and went spinning through the room. McCoy was trying to shield the hypo and vial with his body when he was whirled about and sent careening across the floor.

Kirk ran to help him to his feet. Spock, rescuing the hypo and vial, said, "Captain, I believe we are experiencing the psychokinetic manifestations of Parmen's delirium."

Kirk's communicator beeped. He flipped it open and Scott's voice said, "Captain, we're fighting a storm!, No discernible cause—I've never seen anything like it! Ten-scale turbulence right now, sir!"

As he spoke, the *Enterprise* gave a violent lurch. Scott turned to Sulu. "Emergency gyros and stabilizers at maximum!" To Kirk he said, "If it keeps up this way, we can't last, Captain!"

"Engines at full speed, Mr Scott. Get her out of orbit and into space!"

"I've tried, sir. We're locked tight!"

"Then there's nothing you can do but batten down and weather it!"

"Right, sir…"

Kirk replaced the communicator in his belt. "Parmen's mind is not only throwing the furniture around, it's tearing the *Enterprise* apart! Bones, knock him out—and fast!"

McCoy drew the last of his chemical mixture into the hypo. He tried to hold his patient still long enough to administer it; but Parmen, staring at him wild-eyed, slammed him back against the wall. McCoy barely succeeded in hanging on to the hypo. Still in his delirium, the philosopher-king caught sight of Alexander. The dwarf was smashed against another marble wall.

"Help! Save me!" he screamed.

Unseen hands were pummeling the dwarf. They jerked him forward only to have him lashed again against the wall. He twisted, ran and was hurled once more against the wall. Kirk raced to him. Kirk seized him, shouting, "Stay behind me!"

"It's no use. His mind will find me anyhow…" He whispered, "Don't save him! Please don't save him. Let him die. The others will all kill each other trying to become ruler…"

A blow meant for Alexander grazed Kirk's cheek. "Bones, hurry up with that shot!"

McCoy, crouching too low for Parmen to see him, grabbed his arm and got the hypo home against his shoulder. Alexander was screaming again. "Agh… I… I can't breathe! Choking… chok—"

"Bones, shake Parmen! Break his concentration!"

As McCoy obeyed, emptying the hypo, the invisible clutch released the dwarf's throat. A pedestal about to fall slowly righted itself. Kirk opened his communicator. Had quiet returned to the *Enterprise?*

"It's all right, Captain," Scott said. "The turbulence has abated."

"I think you'll find the orbit lock is broken as well, Assess damage, Mr Scott, and repair what's necessary."

"Aye, sir."

Philana had seen that sleep had stilled the patient. Gracious now, she spoke to the visitors. "I don't know how I can ever thank you enough, not only for myself but for Platonius."

Kirk was brief. "No thanks are necessary."

"Alexander, show our guests to the South Wing."

"No, thank you," Kirk said. "We must return to the *Enterprise*."

McCoy spoke. "Jim, I think I should wait till the fever breaks."

Kirk hesitated. He'd had enough of Platonius and Platonians. On the other hand, McCoy was a doctor. To snatch him away from a patient for whom still more might need to be done was arbitrary action, whoever the patient was.

"Then we'll stay," he said.

The South Wing was a magnificent suite, hung with silk and decorated in the same classic Greek fashion as Parmen's atrium. Alexander scurried about, introducing them to dressing rooms and sleeping quarters. "You need anything, just say so," he told Kirk.

Kirk smiled at him. "Thanks, Alexander."

"Think nothing of it; you people saved my life." He swallowed nervously. "I… I think I ought to tell you…"

"Tell us what?" Kirk said.

The little man appeared to change his mind. He shook his head, a worried little smile on his mouth. "Just that I didn't know any people like you existed."

Kirk peered through the door into an empty corridor. "Where is everyone?" he said.

"In their chambers—meditating."

Kirk turned. "Alexander, are there other Platonians like you?"

The dwarf's face quivered. "What do you mean, 'like me'?"

"Who don't have psychokinetic ability?" Kirk said quietly.

"For a minute I thought you were talking about my… my size. They laugh at my size. But to answer your question, I'm the only one who doesn't have it. I was brought here as the court buffoon. That's why I'm everybody's slave."

"How does one get this power?" Spock said.

"As far as I know, it just comes to you after you're born. They say I'm a throwback and I am. But so are you!" Fear came into his eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean, anything. I shouldn't have said that."

"Don't worry about it," Kirk said. "We're happy without the ability."

Alexander studied Kirk's face. "You know, I think you are," he said slowly. He paused. "Where you come from, are there a lot of people without the power . . , and my size?"

Kirk was beginning to like the little man. "Size, shape or color doesn't matter to us. And nobody has the power."

Alexander stared. "Nobody!"

Even as he stared, he was being pulled backward toward the door. He gave a miserable little laugh. "Somebody wants me," he told them. Then he was yanked out of the room.

Kirk looked at Spock. The Vulcan shrugged. "It will be pleasant to leave," he said.

Kirk began to pace. "That may not be easy. If Parmen should die…"

"Even if he shouldn't…"Spock said.

Kirk nodded. "This little Utopia of theirs is about the best-kept secret in the galaxy. Screening themselves from, our sensors, locking us in orbit—*it all adds up to a pattern*, Spock—and one I do not like…"

McCoy, with his medical kit, came through the door. He closed it behind him.

"Well?" Kirk said.

"My concoction has actually worked. Fever's broken, and Lord, what recuperative powers! The infection's already begun to drain."

"Dr McCoy, you may cure the common cold yet!" Spock said.

Kirk took out his communicator. "If we're going to make it out of here, this is the time." He flipped the dial "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Scott,

come in, please…"

"Scott here, sir."

"Standby to beam us up."

Scott spoke slowly. "I'm afraid I can't, Captain. All our instrumentations, even our phaser weapons, are frozen."

"The turbulence hit you that hard?"

"It's not the turbulence, sir. Damage to the ship is minimal."

"Then what's caused it?"

Scott's voice was despairing. "I wish I knew, sir. You tell me. I'm only reporting the facts."

Kirk eyed the door. It was still closed. "Scotty, we're up against a society that has psychokinetic energy more powerful than our machines. Did you get out into space?"

"No, Captain. The orbit lock is tighter than ever. And our subspace communication with Starfleet Command is completely severed."

Kirk spoke softly. The contrast between his voice and the fury in his face was so marked that McCoy and Spock stared at him. "I'm going to take care of this. I'll get back to you, Scotty." He closed the communicator, replaced it in his belt; and opening the door, strode out into the corridor.

He found Parmen sitting up on the couch. The philosopher-king's eyes were closed, not with weakness, but with the ravishment of aesthetic ecstasy. The deformed Alexander stood beside him, plucking a lyre as he chanted a song from an Aristophanes play…

Great Pan

Sounds his horn: Marking time

To the rhyme

With his hoof,

With his hoof.

Forward, forward in our plan

We proceed as we began…

The wretched dwarf croaked, imitating a chorus of frogs.

He turned at the sound of Kirk's entrance. He seemed to shrink into a still smaller man at Kirk's approach to the couch.

"Your Excellency!" Kirk said.

Parmen opened his eyes, annoyed by interruption of his artistic trance. Then Plato's views on Republican behavior calmed him. "Parmen will do," he said. "Philosopher-kings have no need of titles."

"I want to know why the *Enterprise's* weapons and instrumentation are frozen—why the ship itself is locked in orbit!"

"Captain, please. You're mistaken, I assure you…"

The bland evasion enraged Kirk further. "I just spoke to my Engineer aboard the *Enterprise*," he said. "We showed our good faith. Now you show yours. I want that ship released immediately."

Alexander, in panic, was shaking his head at him, mouthing the words, "No—no…" Kirk saw why. Parmen was manifestly displeased. The cultivated benignity of his face had been displaced by a supercilious tightness. "The amenities, Captain," he said. "Allow me to remind you that I am the head of this Principality. Guests don't come barging in here, making demands and issuing orders!"

He looked at Kirk's phaser. The weapon left Kirk's belt and zoomed into Parmen's hand. Kirk studied the cold face with contempt. "Guests!" he said. "You don't know the meaning of the word! Guests are not treated like common prisoners!"

Parmen was more than displeased by the rebuke. His face worked with rage—a rage that held no vestige of Platonic calm. "Don't take that tone with me!" he shouted.

Kirk's hand was lifted to strike him sharply across his left cheek. Then his other hand was brought up to slap his right one. In a matter of seconds he'd lost all power to control his hands. Parmen, leaning back on the couch, watched him repeatedly slap himself across the face with one hand after the other.

Control of his communicator seemed to be also lost. Despite several calls to Scott, he couldn't raise him. Finally, he closed the communicator. His face was burning from the beating he'd given it. Like his anger. That burned, too.

Spock turned from one of the silken curtains that draped a window of their suite. "Obviously," he said, "Parmen does not want any contact made with the *Enterprise*."

McCoy protested. "He may still need the ship's medical stores. Why should he prevent contact?"

"To hide any knowledge of his brutal treatment of a Starfleet Captain," Spock said.

Kirk shook his head. "No, Mr Spock. One thing is certain. Parmen is not concerned with either my dignity or safety."

"Agreed, Captain," Spock said. "And he would not have treated you so brutally if he had any intention of releasing you—or the *Enterprise*."

Suddenly, McCoy rose from a couch and started toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Kirk said.

"I don't want to go, Jim—but I can't help myself."

As he spoke, Kirk was yanked toward the door, too; and Spock, twisted around, was forced to follow him. The three were literally trotted into the corridor, staring down at their moving legs in horror. Willessly, they were propelled back into Parmen's chamber. And to the beat of a lyre and drum. At their entrance, Alexander, a one-man band, evoked a great drum roll that matched the rhythm of their trotting feet. Parmen, Philana beside him, applauded the show.

She rose from the couch and curtsied to them. "Gentle spacemen, we are eternally in your debt," she said. "Please accept some trifles as tokens of our gratitude. They stem from the very source of our inspiration. To the noble captain, a shield carried by Pericles as a symbol of his gallant leadership…"

She motioned to a shield on the wall. It flew into Kirk's hands. He was about to drop it; but it hovered at his hands, persistent. At last he was compelled to take it; and Philana, smiling, said, "And to our silent and cerebral Mr Spock, that kathara from which to pluck music to soothe his ever-active brow…"

The instrument left a bench. It sailed over to Spock, who took it; and without looking at it, shoved it under his arm.

It was McCoy's turn to become the recipient of favor. "And lastly, the physician who saved Platonius and my spouse. To you, Dr McCoy, that ancient collection of Greek cures, penned by Hippocrates himself…"

A scroll rose from a table and floated over to McCoy. Kirk saw him begin to unroll it. He took a furious step forward. "Has my ship been released yet?" he demanded.

Parmen spoke. "Captain, wait. I know what you're thinking. My humble apologies. You were badly used. In my own defense, allow me to say that my illness was more profoundly disturbing than I myself realized."

He leaned back on his couch. A great leaner, Parmen. From his newly-relaxed position, he added, "I'm sure, Captain, that you, too, have been out of sorts; and have reacted with fits of temper and rage. Unlike you, however, what I think and feel is instantly translated into reality. Please find it in your heart to forgive me."

Kirk said, "*Has the Enterprise been released yet?*"

"It will be, shorty. You're free to leave the planet."

Kirk turned on his heel, speaking over his shoulder. "Good day, then. And thank you for the gifts."

"Not at all. There is, though, one final request…"

Kirk whirled. He'd known there was a catch in this somewhere. "Well?" he said.

But Parmen was looking at McCoy. "After my nearly fatal infection," he said, "it has become clear to us all that we cannot afford to be without a skilled physician." He paused. "We'd like you, Dr McCoy, to remain with us."

Kirk stood very still. He heard McCoy say, "I'm sorry. That's impossible."

Parmen sat up. "Your duties will be extraordinarily light. You'll be able to read, meditate, conduct research—whatever you like. You will want for nothing."

"I'm afraid the answer is no."

"We'd like to keep this cordial—but we're determined to have you stay, Doctor."

Kirk fought to keep his voice steady. "You can bring yourself to do this after Dr McCoy saved your life?"

"I'm losing patience, Captain…"

Despite all his efforts, Kirk's scorn broke through. "And you consider yourself Plato's disciple!"

The comment amused Parmen. "We've managed to live in peace and harmony for centuries, my dear Captain."

Spock's voice was icy. "Whose harmony? *Yours?* Plato wanted beauty, truth and, above all, justice."

The remark hit Parmen where he hurt. "Captain, please! I admit circumstances have forced us to make a few adaptations of Plato. But ours is the most democratic society conceivable! Anyone at any moment can be and do just as he wishes, even to becoming the ruler of Platonius *if* his mind is strong enough!"

"And if it isn't strong enough, he gets torn apart like Alexander!"

Parmen reverted to another lean-back against his couch. "Oh, come now, Captain, we're not children. In *your* culture, justice is the will of the stronger. It's forced down people's throats by weapons and fleets of spaceships. On Platonius we'll have none of these. Our justice is the will of the stronger *mind*. And I, for one, consider it a vast improvement."

"Why?" Kirk said. "Never would we use our weapons for the kind of brutality you practice!"

Relaxation deserted Parmen again. He got to his feet. "Farewell, Captain Kirk."

Kirk spoke to McCoy. "Come on, Doctor."

He and Spock turned to leave. But McCoy was rooted to the spot where he stood. Kirk, looking back, saw him unmoving, rigid.

"Bones?"

"I—I can't move, Jim. They're going to keep me, no matter what. Leave, please!"

Before, Kirk had never understood the term "towering rage." Now he did. His fury seemed to be making him twelve feet tall in height. "*No!*" he shouted. "You're a doctor, Bones! They need your goodwill. They're just trying to—"

Parmen interrupted. "Captain, go while you still can."

"We're staying right here until Dr McCoy is released!"

"This is not the *Enterprise*. And you're not in command here, Captain."

Kirk saw Philana shrug. "Why even discuss it, Parmen? Get rid of them."

"But that might offend the good doctor, Philana." An idea—a delightful one—seemed to strike Parmen. He smiled at Kirk. "You wish to stay? Then do, by all means. You can help us celebrate our anniversary." He spoke to the immobilized McCoy. "In the process, I hope we can persuade you to join our tiny Republic…"

McCoy's tongue was still his to use. "You won't persuade me," he said.

"I think we will," Parmen told him.

Two garlands detached themselves from a marble statue of Aphrodite; and, whirling through the air, landed at the feet of Kirk and Spock. They were forced to bend and pick them up. Their gifts fell from their hands; and the same force compelled them to place the garlands ceremoniously on each other's heads.

Parmen nodded to Alexander. The drum broke into a dancing beat. Kirk and Spock began a tap dance. Spock looked down at his shuffling feet in disgust. But Parmen's delightful idea of celebration was just beginning to be realized. The two *Enterprise* men found themselves childishly skipping around the pool, bowing to each other in mechanical precision. Then a line of a song was placed in Kirk's mouth. "I'm Tweedledee, he's Tweedledum…" Spock bowed to him, singing, "Two spacemen marching to a drum…"

It wasn't over. "We slithe among the mimsy troves," Kirk sang. Spock bowed to him again. "And gyre amidst the borogroves…"

The garlands were exchanged. Kirk pouted sadly at the loss of his; and Spock, grinning madly in triumph, put it on his head. They bowed stiffly to each other and were dropped to their knees.

"McCoy!" Kirk yelled. "You're not staying here, no matter what he does to us!"

Parmen made an imperious gesture. Kirk coughed. He could feel the defiance in his face replacing itself with a pleading abjectness. He heard himself reciting—

Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend,
No services to do till you require.
Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you.
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour
When you have bid your servant once adieu…
There was no time for breath. The shaming words continued to stream from him…
Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
Where you may be or your affairs suppose,
But, like a sad slave, stay and think of naught
Save where you are how happy you make those!
So true a fool is love that in your will
Though you do anything, he thinks no ill…

The idiot thing was done. Kirk's head went down.

"Stop it! Stop it!" McCoy shouted.

Kirk looked up. "No matter what he makes me say, it's no. You hear me, McCoy—*no!* I…."

His head was almost twisted from his shoulders. He was jerked to his feet, an arm wrenched behind his back. Something grabbed him under the chin—and pulled his neck back, back until a cry of pain escaped him.

"Well, Doctor?" Parmen said.

McCoy was agonized, wavering with the torment of indecision. He was torn not only by laceration of his deep personal affection for Kirk. There was his professional obligation, too. As the

Enterprise's surgeon, its captain's well-being was his prime consideration. If he agreed to remain with these people, he could end the torture, serving both his love for Kirk and his duty to Starfleet service. Finally, he came to his anguished decision. He turned to Parmen. "I have my orders," he said.

Parmen's mouth tightened. "As you wish, Doctor."

Kirk was hurled to the ground. He got up, fists clenched, and rushed at Parmen. The Platonian stared at him. Kirk was frozen, a raised foot still in the air. "Is this your Utopia?" he shouted. "You haven't even…"

He was flung again to the floor. Then words, too, were denied him. His vocal cords went dead.

"We've had enough of your moralizing," Parmen said.

McCoy whirled. "And we've had too much of *yours!* You will never get me to stay here!"

He was smashed backward.

"You will be happy to stay," Parmen told him. "It takes a little time, Doctor. But you will be happy to stay, I promise you."

He unfroze Spock from his knees. The Vulcan, sickened by Kirk's misery, moved toward Parmen only to be frozen in mid-stride.

Philana looked at Spock. "Perhaps you have been a bit too forceful, Parmen. There are other ways that might be more persuasive."

"I doubt that they will be as entertaining. But if you want to have a try, do so."

Spock gave a cry. Philana had sent him into a wild, stamping flamenco. He danced around and around the downed Kirk. McCoy, unseeing, was staring straight ahead.

"An excellent choice, Philana," Parmen said. He spoke to the rigid McCoy. "All you have to do is nod."

The air was filled with the clack of castanets. The viciously-heel-stamping Spock was moved in close to Kirk's head. An inch closer —and Kirk would be trampled to death. A stomping heel grazed his head. McCoy, about to make an appeal, clamped his mouth shut. Then he closed his eyes against the sight of Spock's helpless attack on Kirk.

The Castanet sounds ceased. So did Spock's dancing. He froze in a finger-snapping gesture over Kirk's body. His arms dropped. He began to shake. Out of him came wild peals of laughter.

McCoy opened his eyes as he heard them. He looked, appalled, at Spock as his laughter grew wilder. He swung around to Parmen.

"Mr Spock is a Vulcan," he said. "You must not force emotion from him."

"You must be joking, Doctor," Philana said.

"It can destroy him," McCoy said.

"Come now," Parmen said. "There's nothing so wholesome as a good laugh."

Spock was battered now by the insane fits of laughter. McCoy saw him pressing at his chest to soothe the agony of the spasms. Kirk was fighting to lift himself to get to Spock. He sank back to the floor, too weak to do it. McCoy launched a fierce blow at Parmen. "You're killing Spock!" he cried.

"Then we can't let him die laughing, can we now?" Parmen asked.

The laughter ended. Slowly Spock fell to his knees, his head limp, arms dangling.

"The poor fellow does look rather miserable, doesn't he, dear wife?"

Philana encircled Parmen with her arm. "He does, dear husband. You know, nothing relieves misery like a good, honest cry." k

McCoy stared at them. "He's a Vulcan! I beg you…"

Parmen's face was flushed with a growing excitement "Later! Later!" he said impatiently. "That's probably not true of Vulcan men, anyway. Shall we test it, Philana?"

Spock's shoulders began to shake. His body rocked from side to side as though wracked by a sudden woe. He was looking into Kirk's pain-ravaged face. Kirk moved on the floor toward him, his arm out. "Hang on, Spock," he whispered. "Hang on! Don't let him break you open…" He was tense with the struggle to support Spock's repression. But it was no good. Spock's quiet face had turned into the tormented mask of tragedy. Tears welled in his Vulcan eyes and dripped down his cheeks. Unable to control his sobs, he crashed to the floor.

Alexander, trembling and outraged, hurried to the center of the chamber, his lyre in his hand. "Parmen! They saved your life!"

He was flipped back into the pool. He staggered up, soaking wet, his tears mixed with the water. From deeps he didn't know he owned, he delivered his final judgment on his society. "I'm ashamed to be a Platonian. Ashamed!"

It was a resourceful society. Kirk was lifted to his feet; and, from the pool, the dwarf was placed upon Kirk's back. Alexander's arm

whipped him on as he was driven, skipping around Spock's body, its eyes vacant as Kirk passed him.

Parmen spoke sadly to McCoy. "How can you let this go on, Doctor?"

For the moment their ordeals were suspended. They'd been permitted to return to their suite. Alexander had followed them; and was now dressing himself in the dry tunic and pantaloons that were his buffoon's costume. But Spock, his eyes closed, sat apart. The total loss of emotional control had been such a violation of his Vulcan nature that he was still inwardly trembling. Kirk, resting on a couch, watched him anxiously. "Bones, can't you do anything for him?"

"There's no medicine that can help him, Jim. He has to get through this himself."

Despite his aching back, Kirk got up. As he crossed to Spock, McCoy joined him. They stood before him a moment, both quiet; and Spock, slowly becoming aware of their presence, opened his eyes. The awful experience of his turmoil was still evident in them. Kirk looked away from the painful sight of an overwrought Spock. He had no right to intrude on such private agony.

"I trust they did not hurt you too much, Captain."

"Just a sore set of muscles, Spock."

"The humiliation must have been hardest for you to bear, sir. I… I can understand."

He assumed his customary impassive expression. But it was belied by the tremor in his voice and hands. Kirk's fury flamed in him.

McCoy tried to be soothing. "The release of emotion is what keeps us healthy," he observed. "At least, emotionally healthy."

"Fascinating," Spock said. "However, I have noted, Doctor, that the release of emotion is frequently very *unhealthy* for those nearest to you. Emotionally, that is."

Kirk forced a chuckle. "Which proves again that there are no perfect solutions."

"It would seem so, Captain."

Spock's eyes closed again. He spoke with them closed. "Captain!"

"Yes, Spock."

"Captain, do you still feel anger toward Parmen?"

"Great anger."

"And you, Dr McCoy?"

"Yes, Spock. Great hatred."

"You must release it somehow… as I must master mine."

Spock suddenly stood up, his eyes wide open. They blazed with rage. He shuddered with the effort to control it, his fists clenching. "They almost made me kill you, Captain. That is why they have stirred in me such hatred. Such great hatred. I must not allow it to go further. I must master it. I must control…"

He grabbed Kirk's arm. His hand tightened on it until it seemed his great strength would snap a bone. Kirk held absolutely still. Gradually, Spock relaxed. He dropped the arm. His body was quieted as though the fierce embrace of his captain's arm had been a desperately needed reassurance of the dear existence. He sat down.

McCoy, his face drawn with strain, drew Kirk aside. "Jim… Jim, listen. I've thought it over. This is senseless. I'm going to stay."

"You can't, Bones."

"I have Parmen's word that you'll be safe."

"Parmen's word! He'll let us beam up to the *Enterprise*—and then plunge the ship into this atmosphere!"

McCoy shook his head. "Why bother to trick me?"

"If he killed us outright in front of you, you'd retaliate. You're a doctor, you have the means." He put a hand on McCoy's shoulder. "I know you're trying to do the right thing. But if anyone of us got away, Parmen knows that Starfleet will never let this planet go unpunished. He dare not let us go. Sacrifice yourself by agreement to stay—and you'll only be signing our death warrant."

Alexander pulled at McCoy's uniform. "The Captain is right. I didn't warn you. They treated you like they treat me. Only you fight them…"

The dwarf's eyes filled with tears. "All this time I thought it was me—my mind that couldn't move a pebble. They told me how lucky I was that they bothered to keep me around. And I believed them. The arms and legs of everybody's whim. Look down! Don't meet their eyes . . Smile! Smile! Smile! Those great people… They were my gods…"

He seized a vase; and, smashing it against a column, picked up a long, jagged shard of hard earthenware. "You made me see them!" he cried. "I know what they are now. It's not me, not my runty size! It's them. It's them!"

"Alexander, put that down," Kirk said.

"No! It's the best thing for them!"

Kirk and McCoy moved toward nun. "I said drop it," Kirk said.

Alexander backed toward the door. "I'm going to cut them up. Parmen first. They'll become infected. Only this time, no matter what they say, let them die!"

Kirk nodded at McCoy. They both rushed the little man; and, as McCoy, pinned an arm, the dwarf reluctantly surrendered the weapon to Kirk. "Let me at least give them a taste of what they gave me!" he pleaded. "Please! They're going to kill you anyhow! You already know that…"

"There's no point in your dying, too," Kirk said.

Alexander stared at him. Then a sob broke from him.

"That's… the first time… somebody's thought of my life before his own…" Remorse overwhelmed him. "But it's… all my fault. I should have told you right off that they were out to kill you. I knew… I knew—but I was afraid." The tears welled again.

"It's all right, Alexander," Kirk said. "We haven't given up. Maybe you can help us."

"I'll do anything for you… anything. Just tell me what to do."

"It might help us to know one thing. Did all the other Platonians always have the power?"

"No. Not before we came here to this terrible planet.".

Spock had joined them. "Then they acquired their psychokinetic power *after* coming here," Kirk said..

"I guess so."

Spock spoke. "Is it possible for you to recall how long after you arrived here that their power began to develop?"

"How could I forget? It was exactly six months and fourteen days after we got here that they started pushing me around."

"Would you know how many months' supplies you brought with you?"

The dwarf's effort to remember was obvious. "I think it was four months… no, three. Yes, three…"

"That's close enough," Spock said. "Fascinating. The power developed two or three months after they started eating native foods."

Alexander's eyes widened in surprise. "Yeah! That's right."

Spock turned to Kirk. "Then it would be logical to assume that there is connection between their psychokinetic power and the

native foods."

McCoy puzzled over Spock's hypothesis. "Then why wouldn't Alexander have the same power as the others?"

"Perhaps his system can't absorb the crucial element, Doctor."

"Bones, I'd like you to take a reading of Alexander's blood," Kirk said.

The dwarf clutched Kirk. "Will it hurt much?"

McCoy smiled at him. "You won't know it happened," he said as he ran his tricorder over his arm.

"Bones, you still have the tricorder reading of Parmen's blood?"

"Of course. Parmen possesses the highest order of psychokinetic ability; Alexander the lowest—and under the same environmental conditions." He looked at Kirk. "I'll put both of their blood samples through a full comparative test in the tricorder."

"If our theory proves out, we've got a weapon…" Kirk said.

When the tricorder buzzed, McCoy read out its information on its data window. "The one significant difference between Parmen's blood and Alexander's is the concentration of kironide, broken down by pituitary hormones."

"Kironide's a high-energy source. It could be it!" Kirk said.

"The pituitary hormones confirm the assumption," Spock said. He looked at Alexander. "They also regulate body growth."

"You mean the same thing that kept me from having the power made me a dwarf?"

Spock nodded. "It is obvious now why Parmen has kept his Utopia such a secret. Anyone coming down here and staying long enough would acquire the power."

"Exactly, Mr Spock." Kirk wheeled to McCoy. "Isn't there some way to build up the same concentration of kironide in us?"

"It'll take doing but it should be possible, Jim."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

McCoy went to work. Pulling vials from his kit, he inserted them in the tricorder. He checked a dial. Then he reached for an optical tube. More vials went into the tricorder. He hesitated. "Jim, even if the kironide has the desired effect, it still may not help us get out of here."

Kirk looked anxiously at Spock. "If all of us do come up with the power, what chance do we have against thirty-eight of them?"

"The point's well taken, Captain. However, the power isn't additive. If it were, with the Platonians' hostile propensities, two or

three of them would have combined forces centuries ago—and deposed Parmen."

Alexander pulled at Kirk's sleeve. "He's right. Parmen says everyone has his own separate power frequency. He says whenever they try to put their power together and use it, it never works."

McCoy straightened, the hypo in his hand. "I'm ready."

"Then let's not waste time. Give us double the concentration found in Parmen's blood."

As Spock was injected, he said, "The time factor concerns me. It may take days or weeks before there's enough buildup from the kironide to do us any good."

"What about Alexander?" Kirk asked.

"Well," McCoy said, "since the kironide's already broken down and injected directly into the bloodstream, it should work on him as well as the rest of us. Better, in fact—he's acclimated."

But Alexander wanted no part of kironide. "You think the power is what I want? To be one of them? To just lie there and have things done for me—a blob of nothing! You're welcome to the power! And if you make it out of here, all I ask is that you take me with you. Just drop me any place where they never heard of kironide or Platonius!"

Kirk said, "All right, Alexander. All right…"

"Jim!"

At the tone of McCoy's voice, Kirk whirled. In the room air was shimmering with the familiar Transporter sparkle.

Unbelieving, he watched the dazzle form into the shapes of Uhura and Christine Chapel. They saw him—but when they tried to speak, their mouths were clamped shut. Then their legs moved, marching them like marionettes toward a dressing room.

"Nurse! Lieutenant Uhura!" Kirk shouted.

They didn't turn. As they disappeared into the dressing room, two lovely, sheer mini-robes floated after them.

Acidly bitter, Kirk finally spoke to his men. "The afternoon entertainment wasn't enough for them," he said.

And he stayed bitter, as arrangements were made for the evening's entertainment. *Enterprise* uniforms vanished. He and Spock were forcibly clad in short Greek tunics, knotted over one shoulder. Leaf wreaths were settled on their heads. And in the

main room of the suite, a table appeared. Piled high with food, with fruit and wine, it glittered, heavy, with silver and crystal.

The dressing room door opened. A little shy in her highly becoming mini-robe, Christine hesitated. Then her pleasure in seeing them sent her smiling to them. "Are we glad to see you!"

Uhura addressed the question in Kirk's eyes. "We were forced into the Transporter and beamed down. It was like becoming a puppet for someone."

"I thought I was sleepwalking," Christine told him. "I couldn't stop myself."

"I don't understand it," Uhura said. "A simple invitation would have brought me running for this…" She lifted a soft fold of the golden robe that matched her exotic skin color.

"Definitely," Christine agreed. "Why use force on a girl to get her into clothes like these?" Then she paused, looking at Kirk. "Captain, what's wrong? Something's terribly wrong, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kirk said quietly.

He had heard the sound of laughter. The bewildered girls stared at each other; and Kirk said, "Spock, have you felt any reaction to the kironide shot?"

"I have experienced a slight flush, Captain."

"So did I. Shall we try a simple test? Let's concentrate on raising that cluster of grapes."

They fixed their eyes on the grapes, the girls watching them in uncomprehending silence. The grapes continued to nestle placidly between two apples.

"Didn't budge," Kirk said.

There was a fanfare of music and a burst of applause. Kirk looked up from the disappointing grapes. Panels set into the room's walls had slid aside, revealing boxes behind them. They were crowded with Platonians. Kirk caught sight of Alexander at a music stand, his instruments beside him. Parmen, Philana and McCoy occupied the center box. The philosopher-king stood up, lifting a hand.

"Fellow Academicians! Twenty-five hundred years ago a hearty band of vagabonds arrived on this barren planet. Those were times of desperate hardship and heart-breaking toil. Then a divine Providence graced our genius with the power of powers! Through it, our every need was materialized. We determined to form a Utopian Brotherhood. This is a festive occasion. For tonight, we welcome its first new member into our Brotherhood!"

Kirk used the top of his voice. "Don't count on it, Parmen! First you must win the doctor's consent!"

McCoy, shouting back, called, "I'll never give it, Jim!"

Whispering, Parmen said, "Doctor, please. You are destroying the festive mood…" He waved a hand. "Let the madcap revels begin!"

The four *Enterprise* people were sent whirling around the couches in a game of musical chairs. Then Uhura was dropped on one in a languorous pose. Christine's turn came. Her chin was placed on a bent hand, her body disposed in a seductive position. Kirk and Spock were each pulled to a couch. After a moment they were caused to exchange places.

Eraclitus called from a box, laughing. "Ah, how fickle and faithless! Make up your minds!"

Spock sat on Christine's couch, straining against Parmen's will-to-power. It was no use. His arms encircled Christine; and her hand was forced up to caress his face. The Platonians tittered.

"I am so ashamed, Mr Spock." But even as her whisper reached Spock, her hand had reached into his hair to tousle it amorously. She whispered again. "Oh, stop it, Mr Spock. Please make them stop it…"

But they were in a close embrace, Christine's arms entwined around him. His eyes were closed in desperate concentration. He was forced to open them in order to gaze passionately into Christine's. Their lips met. As the kiss ended, she said brokenly, "I have so wanted to be close to you. Now all I want to do is crawl away someplace and die…"

"Careful, Mr Spock!" Eraclitus called. "Remember! The arrows of Eros kill Vulcans!"

Christine sank back on the couch. Spock's body followed hers to shouts of "Bravo! Bravo!"

Uhura was saying, "I am so frightened, Captain… so frightened…"

"That's the way they want you to feel, Lieutenant. It makes them think they're alive."

"I know it… I wish I could stop trembling…"

Kirk pulled her to him. Uhura looked into his eyes.

"Try not to think of them," Kirk said. "Try!"

She smiled faintly. "You know what I'm thinking, Captain?"

"What, Lieutenant?"

"I'm thinking of all the times on the *Enterprise* when I was scared to death. And I would see you so busy with your commands. And I would hear you from all parts of the ship. And then the fear would pass. Now they are making me tremble. But I am not afraid."

Her dark eyes were serene. "I am not afraid…"

They kissed.

The applause was scattered. And what there was of it was too loud.

Philana in her box stirred restlessly. "Parmen, let's get on with it."

"You are so impatient, my wife! Observe the doctor and learn. He is content to wait for the *piece de resistance*."

Nevertheless, Parmen got on with it He moved the table of food into a corner and rolled another one into its place. It was loaded with weapons—swords, a bullwhip, knives, a battle-ax. In its center a brazier, a poker thrust into it, glowed red hot. The two *Enterprise* men were lifted from the girls' couches. Kirk found the bullwhip in his hand. He saw Spock reach for the poker. Its tip of iron flamed with its adopted fire.

Kirk whirled to the boxes. "You're dead, all of you!" he cried. "You died centuries ago! We may disappear tomorrow—but at least we're living now! And you can't stand that! You're half-crazy because you've got nothing inside! Nothing!"

But Parmen was looking at the girls. Turning, Kirk realized that they had been transfixed, helpless, on their couches. The heavy whip rose in his hand and lashed out at Uhura. It flicked close to her cheek.

McCoy could bear no more. He rose in his box. "Stop it, Parmen! Stop it! I can't take any more! I can't! I'll do whatever you want!"

Apparently, his capitulation came too late. Parmen merely grinned at him. "I'll stay here with you!" McCoy cried. "I'll serve you. But stop this!"

Alexander broke from his place. Racing to the table of weapons he seized a knife and rushed at Parmen. He was stopped cold. Parmen stood up. "Alexander, again! He likes to play with knives. Very good. We'll indulge him…"

Slowly, relentlessly, the knife blade was pressed against the little man's throat. It halted there—and suddenly, unseen fists slammed Parmen against the back of his box.

The shaken Platonian stared around him. Staggering back, he shouted, "Who… who… who did that?"

Kirk tossed the whip away. "*I did!*"

Eraclitus was on his feet. "Impossible!"

"What's going on?" Philana screamed.

Kirk lifted his head to the boxes. "Platonians, hear this! The next one of you who tries anything will get hurt! Not only do we possess your psychokinetic ability, but we've got it at twice your power level!"

"Not twice mine!" Parmen's eyes veered to Alexander.

The dwarf was spun around; and, knife upraised, sent racing toward Kirk. Instead of evading the charge, Kirk stood still, drawing on all his strength of concentration. His new power slowed the onrush. With a supreme effort, he turned Alexander around and set him running toward Parmen. The battle of wills was joined. Parmen's cold eyes bulged with his struggle to recover control of the dwarf. But Alexander had picked up speed. He vaulted into the box, the knife extended to Parmen's heart…

The Platonian shrieked. "Captain, no! I beg of you. I'll do anything you say! I do not wish to die! Do you hear me, Captain?"

Kirk arrested the knife. But Alexander, so close to vengeance for his years of suffering, fought to plunge the knife deep into his tormentor. "Let me do it!" he cried to Kirk. "Let me finish him!"

Kirk strode to the box. "Do you want to be like him, Alexander?" he said.

The dwarf's eyes met his. After a moment, he shook his head. Then he threw the knife at Parmen's feet.

The new power was exhilarating. Kirk used it to force Parmen to kneel before the dwarf. Alexander looked down at the bald, arrogant head. "Listen to me, Parmen! I could have had the power—but I didn't want it! I could have been in your place right here and now! But the sight of you and your Academicians sickens me. Because, with all your brains, you're dirtier than anything that ever walked or crawled in the whole universe!"

As he jumped from the box to Kirk's side, he turned to say, "Get up from your knees! Get up!"

Parmen, his world crashed around him, spoke to Kirk. "Captain, you knew it was my intention to destroy you and the *Enterprise*. Yet you have spared me."

Kirk eyed him for a long moment. "To us, killing is murder—even for revenge. But I am officially notifying you that other Starships will be visiting Platonius—and soon!"

He'd been right. There was nothing in these people. Once their control power was defeated, they shriveled into nothing. Their ruler was too hasty with his reassurance. "There's no need for concern, Captain. They'll be safe. Of late, I've begun to feel that we've become bizarre and unproductive. It's time for some fresh air. We'll welcome your interstellar visits."

"I don't believe you," Kirk said. "The minute we leave, you'll lose your fear—and turn as sadistic as ever. So let me warn you. This incident will be reported in its entirety to Starfleet Command."

His voice went icy. "Keep your power. We don't want it. But, if need be, we can create it in a matter of hours. Don't try anything again."

All his essential weakness had appeared in Parmen's flabby face. "Understood, Captain. And you're right. None of us can be trusted. Uncontrolled power turns even saints into savages. We can all be counted on to live down to our lowest impulses."

"You're good at making speeches," Kirk said. "I hope your last one sinks in. Stand back."

Obediently, Parmen shrank back into the box. Philana was haggard, almost looking her great age. McCoy left them to join Kirk.

"Alexander!" Kirk called.

As the dwarf hurried over to him, Kirk released his communicator from his belt. Flipping, it open, he said, "Kirk to Scott. I'm bringing a guest aboard. Standby to beam us up."

Alexander looked at him, love in his long-suffering eyes.

WINK OF AN EYE

(Arthur Heinemann and Lee Cronin)

In the space fronting the handsome building of unidentified metal, a fountain flung its sparkle of spray into the air. Kirk, abstracted, watched Security Guard Compton taking samples of its water. Nearby, McCoy was scanning the plaza's periphery with his tricorder. Necessary but time-consuming occupations, Kirk thought. And useless. They had done nothing to locate the source of that distress call that had forced their beam-down to this unexplored planet calling itself Scalos.

With abrupt impatience, he opened his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Lieutenant Uhura, does the location of that distress signal exactly correspond to this area?"

"Yes, sir. And I am receiving visual contact with the Scalosians. I can't see you on the viewing screen but I can see them."

"Check coordinates, Lieutenant."

"The coordinates correspond, sir."

His impatience grew. "There are no Scalosians, Lieutenant. Apart from our landing party, there is nobody here."

"Their distress call is very strong, sir. They are begging for immediate assistance."

"Check circuits for malfunction. Captain out" He looked up to meet McCoy's nod. "There *must* be a malfunction, Jim. This is a barren world—hardly any vegetation; no apparent animal life."

As though to contradict him, a shrill mosquito whine sounded near Kirk's head. He struck the invisible insect away. "But there's some kind of insect life," he said.

"My tricorder doesn't register it."

"My ears did," Kirk retorted. He dropped the subject for Spock, rounding a corner of the strangely-fluted metal building, was approaching them. "Anything, Mr Spock?"

"Evidently a civilization of high order, Captain, rating number seven on the Industrial Scale. Humanoid in appearance, according to paintings. An abundance of literature which I shall have

translated and processed. Certain structures hold signs of recent occupancy. Other ones apparently long abandoned."

"But no sign of present life," Kirk said.

As he spoke, he noted that Compton, rinsing his hands in the fountain's jet, had lifted one to knock away some unseen annoyance at his ear. At the same moment, he again heard the mosquito whine. He had to make an effort to concentrate on what Spock was saying. "? indication of life forms of a highly unusual intermittent nature. They have neither discernible shape nor location. A most puzzling phenomenon, sir."

"The Scalosians *were* here," Kirk said. "We saw them on the viewing screen, Mr Spock. Lieutenant Uhura can still see them. She's still getting their distress call. What happened to them?"

"At this moment I cannot answer that, Captain."

"Mr Spock, I want you to make a complete survey of this planet. You will use all the ship's instruments—"

He broke off at McCoy's shout. "Jim! Compton's gone! Look over there! Compton's gone!"

Emptiness was where the guard had been stooping at the fountain. McCoy was staring at its feathered plume of water dazedly. "Compton—gone," he said again.

"Bones!" Kirk said. "Snap out of it! What happened?"

McCoy's shocked eyes veered to his. "He… was stowing vials of that fountain's water in his shoulder bags… when he vanished. I was looking straight at him—and then he wasn't there. He wasn't there, Jim. He… just wasn't there…"

Had the Scalos distress signal been real? Maybe unreal like its inhabitants. Kirk, entering the *Enterprise* bridge, barked an inconsequential order to an unremembered crew member. As he sat down in his command chair, he said, "Lieutenant Uhura, start a replay of that distress call." Then he hit a switch. "Mr Scott, are all Transporter controls still in functioning order?"

"Aye, sir. Is Mr Spock still down on the planet's surface?"

"He's in Sickbay. Dr McCoy is running a check on the landing party." His attention, used to dispersing itself to note any significant movement in the bridge, had registered Uhura's look as she struggled with her dials. "What is it, Lieutenant?"

She was frowning. "Malfunction, sir." She touched a switch—and her frown deepened. "Now it's corrected itself."

Sulu spoke. "Captain, there's some trouble on the hangar deck. Controls are frozen."

"Have repair crews been assigned?"

"Yes, sir."

Kirk shot a look of inquiry at Uhura. She nodded. "The tape of the distress call is ready, sir."

Spock had quietly returned to his station. Now he turned to look at the viewing screen. An upside-down image took shape on it. Then, righting itself, it showed a proud, strong male face. Its lips moved. "Those of us who are left have taken shelter in this area. We have no explanation for what has been happening to us. Our number is now five…"

The face on the screen took on human height and breadth. The figure moved; and around it appeared the four other Scalosians, two of them women. One was surpassingly lovely. The whole impression created by the group was that of a cultured, singularly handsome people, peaceful in purpose. Their spokesman went on. "I am Rael. We were once a nation of nine hundred thousand, this city alone holding—"

"Freeze it," Kirk said.

Uhura immobilized the tape and Spock, swinging around, said, "Perhaps this distress call was prerecorded—and what we received was a taped signal."

"Mr Spock, the fact remains that when we beamed down, we could not find these people. They *were* there—now they're *not* there. Nor is crewman Compton."

"Some force or agent only partially discernible to our instruments may have been responsible, Captain."

Kirk nodded. "Mr Sulu, I want this ship on standby alert while we continue the investigation." But Sulu had turned an anxious face to him. "I have a reading, sir, that our deflectors are inoperative. They do not respond to controls."

"Scotty, assist," Kirk said. He got up to go over to Spock's chair. "Mr Spock, ever since we beamed back up from Scalos, we have suffered a series of malfunctions. I wish an investigation and an explanation. I want—"

McCoy's voice interrupted. "McCoy to Captain Kirk. The Captain's presence for examination is requested."

"Can't it wait, Bones?"

"Your orders, Jim. You're the last one."

"What do you read so far?"

"Can we discuss it in Sickbay?"

Moving to the elevator, Kirk said, "Mr Spock, you have the con." But the elevator doors, instead of whooshing open at his approach, remained shut Kirk wheeled, shouting, "Is this another malfunction?"

Spock jabbed hastily at buttons: and after a long moment, the doors opened slowly, grudgingly. Kirk was still fuming as he jerked off his shirt in Sickbay. "Bones! What did your examinations of the others turn up?"

"All normal. Whatever caused Compton's disappearance didn't affect anyone else."

"Has anyone experienced anything unusual since beaming back up?"

"No mention of it. No, Jim."

But Nurse Chapel looked up from the sheet she was draping over Kirk's midriff. "Yet something's going on, Captain. All the medical supply cabinets have been opened."

Kirk sat up. "Anything missing?"

"Just disordered. As if everything had been picked up and examined."

Once again that insect whine sounded close to Kirk's ear. He waited a moment before he said, "Bones, could something be causing me to hallucinate?" The urgency in his voice startled McCoy out of his concentration on his medical panels. He turned. "How—hallucinate? What do you mean?"

"Twice," Kirk said, "I've felt something touch me. Nothing was there. I just felt it again. Did I just fancy it?"

"There's nothing physically wrong with you, Jim."

"I asked you a question. Am I hallucinating?"

McCoy left his panels. "No."

Kirk leaped from the medical table. "Then we *did* beam something aboard! Something has invaded this ship!" He was making for the intercom when the alarm of a red alert sounded. Over the shrieking of its sirens, he cried, "Captain to bridge! Mr Spock, come in!"

Spock didn't come in. Minutes passed before Kirk could hear the voice, faint, blurred. "Captain, I have a reading from the life support center…"

"Spock, I can't hear you! Check circuits. Is it a malfunction?"

More minutes passed. Then it was Uhura speaking, her voice also dimmed and distorted. "? intercom system breaking down

rapidly…"

Kirk felt the sweat breaking out on his forehead. "Lieutenant, issue a shipwide order! Use communicators instead of the intercom. Arm all crewmen with phaser pistols. Spock, come in!"

The words were a jumble. "Reading… life support… center. Alien… substances… introduced…" Kirk was shouldering into his shirt. "Mr Spock, meet me in the life support center! On the double! Captain to Security! Armed squad to life support center at once!" He was at Sickbay's door when he saw McCoy sway. Christine Chapel, clutching the back of a chair, called, "The oxygen content is dropping, Doctor…"

As for Kirk himself, Sickbay, its door, its cabinets, its equipment, were all swimming into blur. He fought the dizziness that threatened to become darkness, struggling to open his communicator. "Bridge! Bridge! Scotty, where are you? Emergency life support!"

Scott's steady voice said. "Emergency on, sir."

Behind him, McCoy and Christine were gulping in lungfuls of healthy air. Kirk's vertigo subsided—and Scott said, "Condition corrected, Captain."

But the cold hand of imminent death had touched Kirk. It was a man of a different discipline who met Spock at the entrance to the life support center. As wordlessly as it was given, he took the phaser, flinging open the door to the center. Its security guards, sprawled on the floor, were kneeing back up to their feet. One, phaser out, charged to his left, only to be flung back and down again by something invisible. Kirk, staring around him, said, "How do you explain that, Mr Spock?"

The sharp Vulcan eyes scanned their tricorder. "A force field, sir, with the nature of which I am unfamiliar. But I get a reading of alien presences similar to those obtained on the planet. They seem to have no exact location."

" 'Life forms of a highly unusual, intermittent nature'." Kirk recalled grimly. "Phasers on stun, everybody. Sweep the area."

Once more came the thin whine. Phaser beams were lacing the corridor outside. Inside, Kirk and Spock edged cautiously forward to the location of the force field. Instead of flinging them back, it yielded to them; but when a guard moved to follow them, he was struck down.

"It would seem they will allow only the two of us in to the life support unit," Spock said. "Take care, Captain."

Kirk took the advice. He opened the heavy door to the unit, his weapon at the ready. At first glance the unit appeared to be its usual self, its complex coils, squat dynamos, its serpentine tubings and compressors arranged in their customary pattern. Then Kirk saw the gleaming metal of the device affixed to one of the dynamos. The metal was fluted like that of the Scalosian building. Though alien in shape and material, the small device had been able to affect the functioning of the huge life support unit.

"Mr Spock, what is it?"

"I cannot determine, Captain. Perhaps a Scalosian refrigerating system." He scanned the thing with his tricorder. "It would seem that installation of the device is incomplete, sir. Life support is still operational."

"Disconnect it," Kirk said.

But the hand Spock extended toward the fixture was flung back. Kirk, whipping out his phaser, heard yet again that now familiar whine. "Destroy it, Spock!" he shouted.

As their two phasers fired at the device, their weapons disappeared. One moment, they were hard, tangible in their hands; but the next, they were gone. Both men pushed forward and were thrust strongly back.

"And that wasn't a force field!" Kirk cried. "Something pushed me back. They are in here with us!" He swung around, shouting at the empty air. "You! What are you doing to my ship? Show yourselves!"

The mosquito whine shrilled. They tried again, not lunging this time to the device but approaching it. A hard shove sent them stumbling back.

Spock's voice was dry. "It seems that we may look at their mechanism—but that is all, Captain."

Kirk nodded. "A show of strength." He shouted again to the invisible enemies. "But we'll find a way to dismantle this aggressive engine of yours!"

It was more than a mere show of strength. Back on the bridge, they discovered that key systems over the entire ship had either been crossed or fused. Spock's computer alone was still operational. All doors, including those of the elevators, were jammed open. Scott greeted them with a gloom thick as a Tyneside fog. "Warp engines are losing potency, Captain. We shall be on emergency power soon—a situation that gives us at most one week of survival."

Kirk wheeled to Spock. "Have your readings been fed into the computer bank?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

"Readout."

Flipping a switch, Spock addressed the computer. "Analyze and reply. Have we been invaded?"

"Affirmative."

"Nature and description of enemy forces."

"Data insufficient."

"Purpose of the invasion."

"Immediate purpose, seizure and control of the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. Data insufficient for determination of end purpose."

"Is there a link between this seizure and Compton's disappearance?"

"Data insufficient."

"Are we at present capable of resisting?"

"Negative."

"Recommendations?"

"If incapable of resistance, negotiate for terms."

Listening, Kirk glared at the computer. Then he flushed at his own childishness. The computer was just doing its computer job. But men were not computers. "We will not negotiate for terms," he said. "Scotty, do you concur?"

"Aye, sir."

Spock, giving him an approving nod, said, "What are your recommendations, Captain?"

"Coffee," Kirk said. He turned to the pretty yeoman on duty. "Is a round of coffee available to bridge personnel—or have those circuits also been damaged?"

She smiled, adoration in her eyes. It shouldn't have cheered him up—but it did. Challenge hardened his jaw as he looked around him at an air made malevolent by invisible hostility. "Let them take the next step," he said. "The next move is theirs."

His cup of coffee was set on the arm of his chair. He let it wait to cool. Then, as he leaned back in the chair, his hair was suddenly stirred. He stared around him, baffled—and felt soft lips on his. He was hallucinating. McCoy was wrong. He put out a tentative hand, exploring the space before him. Shaking his head, he seized his cup and, after drinking its coffee, replaced it on the chair arm. At

the same instant, he became abruptly aware of a change of tempo in the voices around him. They sounded too slow, like those from a phonograph that was running down. And the movements of the bridge people—they, too, seemed strangely slowed, lethargic.

He went to Spock. But Spock, who had bent to his computer, seemed unable to reach its hood.

"Mr Spock, what's wrong?"

The Vulcan didn't answer. He sat perfectly still in his chair. Kirk wheeled, calling, "Scotty!" No reply. Scott appeared to be frozen in the very act of moving a dial. It was then he heard the feminine giggle—a very feminine giggle. It came from his left. He turned. The Scalosian beauty was standing there, her chestnut hair making a dream of her creamy skin. She wore a short garment of golden gauze that clung to a slim body of subliminally provocative appeal. She was laughing at him; and the gleam of her teeth between her rosy lips gave the lie to all poets' talk of "pearls."

Still laughing, she kissed him. She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him. He tried. He tried to remember who he was; the pressing problems of the *Enterprise*, his command responsibilities. But all he succeeded in doing was to remove the lovely arms from his neck.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Deela, the enemy," she said. "Isn't it delicious?"

He had thought he knew women. But nothing in his experience had prepared him for this dazzling combination of mischief and outrageously open attractiveness. "*You're* the enemy?"

She nodded her enchanting head. "Yes. You beamed me aboard yourself when you came up. A ridiculously long process…"

"What have you done to my ship?"

"Nothing."

He swung around to gesture to the motionless bridge people. "You call that nothing?"

"They're all right," she said. "They're just what they have always been. It's you who are different."

He stared around him. "Lieutenant Uhura… Mr Sulu… every one of them…"

"Captain, they can't hear us. To their ears we sound like insects. That's *your* description, you know. Accurate, if unflattering. Really, nothing's wrong with them."

"Then what have you done to me?"

"Changed you. You are like me now. Your crew can't see you because of the acceleration. We both move now in the wink of an eye. There is a dreary scientific term for it—but all that really matters is that you can see me and talk to me and…" The creamy eyelids lowered over eyes the color of wet green leaves. "? and we can go on from there."

"Why?" Kirk said.

"Because I like you. Didn't you guess?" She came closer to him. She was ruffling his hair now; and he seemed unable to do a thing about it. The situation was out of hand… the presence of his crew… this public exhibition of endearments… her overwhelming beauty… his ship's predicament. He seized the caressing hands. They were warm, soft. It wasn't the answer.

"Is it because you like me that you've sabotaged my ship?"

"It hasn't been sabotaged. We just had to make some changes in it to adjust it to our tempo."

" 'We'?"

"Of course. My chief scientist and his men. I'm their Queen. You're going to be their King. You'll enjoy living on Scalos."

"And what happens to my ship—*my* men?"

"Oh, in a few of their moments they'll realize you've vanished. Then they'll look for you. But they won't find you. You're accelerated far beyond their powers to see. So they'll go on without you…"

He became conscious that her hands were still in his. He released them. She smiled at him. "Don't be stubborn. You *can't* go back to them. You must stay with me. Is that so dreadful a prospect?"

He reached for his phaser. "I won't kill you—but the 'stun' effect isn't very pleasant."

"Go ahead," she said. "Fire it at me."

He fired the stun button. She stepped aside and the beam passed harmlessly by her. She laughed at the look on his face. "Don't look so puzzled. My reactions are much too fast for such a crude weapon. Besides, I'm quite good at self-defense." She pulled a small instrument from her golden belt. Pointing it at his phaser, she fired it—and its beam tore the phaser out of his hand. "It can be set for stun and destroy, too," she said. "Like yours. Please accept what's happened. There's nothing you can do to change it."

His ship. Suppose he capitulated—and went with her? Went with her on the condition she made the *Enterprise* operational again

and removed the device attached to the life support system? Spock could carry on…

His face was somber. She saw it set into grim lines and cried, "Don't fret so! You'll feel better about it in a little while. It always happens this way… they're all upset at first. But it wears off and they begin to like it. You will, too. I promise…"

He turned on his heel and left her. She touched a medallion on the golden belt. "He's on his way to you, Rael. Be gentle with him," she said.

Kirk came at a run down the corridor to the life support center. He found what he expected. The *Enterprise* guards at its door were stiff, rigid. He skirted them; and was starting toward the door when a third guard in the Starship's uniform emerged from a corner. "Compton!" Kirk shouted.

Compton beamed at him. "Captain Kirk! So you made it here!"

"You've been accelerated, haven't you?" Kirk said.

"Yes, sir."

"Are they in there? They've got something hooked in to life support—and we've got to get rid of it. Come on!"

But Compton had barred his way with the Scalosian weapon. "Sorry, sir. Entry is forbidden."

"Who gave that order?"

"The commander, sir. You'll have to step back, please."

"I am your commander—and I order you to let me in."

"I am very sorry, sir. You are no longer my commander."

"Then who is? Deela? Are you working for her?"

Compton reached an arm back into the corner's shadows and drew out the other Scalosian girl. He spoke very earnestly. "At first I refused, sir—but I've never known anyone like Mira. She brought me aboard and I showed them the ship's operations, its bridge controls and life support. I didn't understand at first but I do now. I—I've never been in love before, sir."

Kirk stepped back. Then, lunging at Compton, he chopped the weapon away from him and raced for the door.

In the center, Rael, two other Scalosians beside him, was working on the small device. He looked up as Kirk plunged in. "Stun," he said to one of his men. The weapon came up; and from behind Kirk, pushing him aside, Compton hurled himself at it. His try at protection was too late. The blast caught Kirk. He collapsed. Raging, Rael felled Compton with a blow. "You were ordered to stop him! Why did you disobey?"

Compton's mouth was bleeding. "You wanted to hurt him," he said.

"He was violent and to be subdued. Why did you disobey?"

"He—he was my Captain…"

Compton crumpled. "Go to him, Ekor," Rael said. The man with the weapon knelt beside Compton. Mira, who had drifted into the center, joined him. When he looked up, he said, "There is cell damage." The girl, her pretty face curious, stooped over Compton. "Don't be troubled," Rael told her. "Another will be secured for you." Nodding, she strolled out of the door.

It was Uhura who first noticed the empty command chair. "The captain!" she cried. "He's gone! Mr Spock, the captain's gone! He was sitting there just a minute ago! He'd just drunk his coffee! There's the cup—on the arm of his chair! But where's the Captain?"

Spock had already left his station. "Mr Sulu, what did you see?"

Sulu turned a bewildered face. "That's what happened, sir. He was there, putting his cup down—and then he wasn't there!"

There was a moment's silence before Spock said, "Mr Sulu, did you drink coffee when the yeoman brought it around?"

"Yes, sir."

Spock eyed the bridge personnel. "Did anyone else?" he said.

"I had some," Scott said.

One by one Spock lifted their cups, sniffing at them. Then he sniffed at Kirk's.

"Was it the coffee?" Scott cried. "Are we going to vanish, too, like the captain?"

"The residue in these cups must be analyzed before I can answer that, Mr Scott."

"And by *that* time—" Scott fell silent.

"I suggest," Spock said," that we remember the Captain's words. Make them take the next step. In the meantime we must determine effective countermoves. The con is yours, Mr Scott. I shall be in the medical laboratory."

Deela sat on the deck in life support center, the head of the still unconscious Kirk in her lap. Rael, at the device, watched her as she smoothed the hair from his forehead. "I told you," she said, "to be gentle with him."

"He was violent. We had to stun him to avoid cell damage."

She looked over to where Compton lay in a neglected huddle. "Who damaged that one? You? I might have known it. I suppose he was violent, too."

"He turned against us," Rael said.

"And you lost your temper."

"He had to be destroyed. He had not completely accepted change. It is a stubborn species."

Deela's eyes were still on Compton. "I know what happens to them when they're damaged. You will control your temper, Rael. I don't want that to happen to mine. If they're so stubborn a species, perhaps they'll last longer."

"It may be."

"I hope so. They all go so soon. I want to keep this one a long time. He's pretty."

"He is inferior, Deela!"

"We disagree, Rael."

"You cannot allow yourself to feel an attachment to such a thing!"

"I can allow myself to do anything I want!" The flare of anger passed as quickly as it had come. "Oh, Rael, don't be that way," she coaxed. "Am I jealous of what you do?"

"I do my duty."

"So do I. And sometimes I allow myself to enjoy it."

As she spoke, Kirk's dazed eyes opened. Under his head he felt the softness of feminine thighs. He shook it to clear it; and looking up, saw Deela smiling at him. "Hello," she said.

He sat up—and recognized Rael. Leaping to his feet, he turned on Deela. "Is this what you wanted us for? To take over our ship?"

She rose in one graceful movement. "We need your help. And you and your ship are supplying it."

"And what does that device of yours have to do with the supply?"

"Hush," she said. "I'll tell you everything you want to know. And you'll approve of it."

"Approve!" he shouted. "We're your prisoners!"

"Hardly," she said. "You're free to go wherever you want."

Kirk rushed to the life support unit. Instead of interfering, Rael stepped aside. "Go ahead, Captain. Our mechanism is not yet

completely linked to your support system but it is in operating order. Study it if you wish. I advise you not to touch it."

Kirk's eyes narrowed. He eyed the small device; and spotting its connecting switch, extended a wary hand to it. He snatched it back, the Scalosians watching him expressionlessly. Then, despite the shock of contact with it, he grabbed it boldly with both hands. They froze on it. Deela ran to him; and, careful not to touch the switch herself, released his hands.

"He told you not to touch it!" She folded his numbed palms between hers, warming them. "The cold will soon pass," she said.

Rael spoke. "Our mechanism has its own self-defense arrangement. You should have heeded me."

Kirk jerked his still icy hands from Deela's. He'd had enough of these aliens; and, feeling a sudden compunction for Compton, sprawled and untended in his heap, he went to him quickly to kneel beside him. But what had been the young and vigorous Compton was now withered by age, mummified as though dried by a thousand years of death. He looked up in horror and Rael said, "In your struggle with Compton, you damaged some of his cells. Those newly accelerated to our tempo's level are sensitive to cell damage. They age very rapidly and die."

Kirk got to his feet. "Is this what you have prepared for us?"

"We all die," Rael said. "Even on Scalos." Kirk looked around at the bland faces. Where was the way back into his own time… the time of Spock… of McCoy… of Scotty? A sense of unutterable loneliness overwhelmed him. He walked out of the center.

Behind him Deela cried, "Rael, why did you lie to him? He didn't damage the dead one! You did!"

Rael shrugged. "Perhaps he'll be less violent now."

"There was no reason to make him feel worse than he does!"

"What do you care about his feelings?"

She changed her tactics. "Rael," she said, "he's not one of us. You know he's temporary." But Rael still stooped to his work. She sighed; and touching the medallion on her belt, listened. "He's in the medical laboratory trying to communicate with the Vulcan. He likes that one of the pointed ears. His species seems capable of much affection."

"I have noted that," Rael said stiffly.

"Oh, stop sulking! Accept it. We've had to accept it all our lives! Don't make it worse!"

Rael seized her fiercely in his arms. Her hand was reaching to caress his face when she broke free, laughing and breathless. "Not now," she said. "Go back to work."

He didn't. Instead, he watched her as she followed Kirk out of the center. She found the door of the medical laboratory open. Ignoring the rigid figures of Spock and McCoy, she went to the communicator console where Kirk was dictating. "Kirk to Spock," he was saying. "I have fed all facts ascertainable into the computer banks—" He broke off as he saw Deela.

She studied him—a beautiful woman estimating a man for her own reasons. "Go ahead," she said. "It won't accomplish anything. But it may be historically valuable."

Eyes on her, he continued. "Hyper-acceleration is the key, Mr Spock. We are in their control because of this acceleration. They are able to speed others up to their level as they did to Compton and me. Those so treated then exist at their accelerated tempo, become eventually docile but when—"

"Damaged," Deela said.

Kirk gave her a mock bow. "When damaged, they age incredibly fast as if the accelerated living—"

"Burns them out," Deela said.

"Destroys them. Compton is destroyed. The device affixed to life support produces an icy cold. It is my belief it will turn the *Enterprise* into a gigantic deep-freeze and for purposes the Scalosians alone know—"

"Quite correct," Deela said.

Kirk was ironic. "My opinion has been verified. Their mechanism has its own protective shield, preventing physical contact. I have no means of destroying it. But its destruction is imperative. I am dictating this in the presence of their Queen who has denied none of it. Why she has permitted me to—"

Leaning forward, the cloud of her hair brushing his shoulder, Deela spoke for the record into the communicator.

"Because by the time you hear this, it will be too late. Our mechanism will be activated."

He turned to look at the two stiffened figures of his friends. The ice would creep through the *Enterprise* to stiffen them forever in a shroud of frost. He swung to Deela. "*Why?* Why are you doing this?"

"You really want to know? In a short time, it won't matter to you a bit. You'll be quite happy about it, as Compton was."

"I want to know."

"Oh dear. You *are* so stubborn. It should be obvious to one with your reasoning powers that we're doing it because we have to." She pushed the shining cloud of hair back. "A long time ago, we used to be like you. Then our country was almost destroyed by volcanic eruptions. The water was polluted and radiation was released. That changed us. It accelerated us…"

He waited. It was possible. The long-term effects of radiation were still unpredictable. "The children died," she said. "Most of the women found they couldn't bear any more. All our men had become sterile. We had to mate outside our own people…"

A doomed race. Listening, Kirk seemed to know what he was going to hear. He felt a stab of pity. She gave him a sad little smile. "So, whenever a space ship came by, we sent out calls for help. But accelerating their crews to our level burned them out…" She came to him and put her head on his shoulder. "Don't you see? Must I give you every detail? We're going to take you down with us. Maybe one or two others of your crew, too. We have to. We'll be kind to you. I *do* like you, you know."

"And the rest of my crew?" Kirk said.

"It's as you said. They'll be kept frozen in a reduced animation we know how to suspend. It won't do them any harm. We'll save them for our future needs. You won't last forever. You know that." At the look on his face, a cry tore from her. "Captain, we have the right to survive!"

"Not at the cost you impose," he said.

"You'd do exactly the same thing! You came charging down into that life support room just as soon as you knew it was threatened! You'd have killed every one of my people if you could have…"

"You had invaded my ship! You were endangering my crew!"

"There's no difference!" she cried.

"There's every difference. You are the aggressors!"

"We didn't ask for our situation. We're simply handling it the only way we know how to—the way our parents did and their parents before them…"

"Would you call it a real solution?"

She looked at him, silent. "Have you tried any other answer? Deela, tell your scientist to disconnect his construction—to destroy it! I promise you we'll use every skill we have to help you. We'll even move you to another planet if you want that. We'll call on the most brilliant minds in our Federation for help!"

She shook her head. "We *have* tried other ways. We tried to make the transition to your time level. Those who made the attempt died. We're trapped, Captain, just as you are now. I'm sorry for what it's going to do to you but I can't change it. And you can't change me."

The medallion on her belt beeped. She touched it and Rael's voice said, "Go to the Transporter Room, Deela. Signal me when you're there and beam down."

"With the captain?"

She was frowning, concentrated on the medallion—and Kirk grabbed his chance. He pulled his dictated tape partially out of the computer so that Spock would note it. He heard Rael say, "Yes. I'll activate our mechanism and follow you. I'm setting it to allow enough time for all of us to get off the ship. But don't delay, Deela."

Kirk had raced for the lab door. Behind him, Deela shouted, "The captain's gone!"

"Go after him, Deela!"

But his headstart had given him time to make the Transporter Room. He rushed to its console, ripped out some wire; and had it shut again to conceal the damage as Deela ran in.

"Why did you leave me?" she demanded.

"I panicked," Kirk said.

The green eyes swept over him. "I don't believe that," she said.

"Can we leave before he activates your device?" he said.

She looked at him, her smooth brow puckered suspiciously. Then she touched the medallion. "Rael, we're in the Transporter Room. You can—activate."

"Beam him down at once."

Still doubtful, she gestured Kirk to the platform. At the console, she pushed a switch. It swung, limp—and the smile in the green eyes deepened. "What did you do to the Transporter, Captain?"

"Nothing," he said. "It must be what your people did. Try the switch again."

She obeyed. Then she touched the medallion communicator. "The Transporter isn't working," she said quietly.

"What did he do to it?"

She delayed her answer. The impishness glinted in her eyes. She was enjoying herself. It was fun to pretend she didn't know what she knew. "Nothing," she told Rael. "He didn't have time. I think it's a—what do they call it? A malfunction. You'd better not activate

yet." She turned to Kirk, the amusement still in her face. "What would you say it is, Captain?"

He assumed a thoughtful look. "Well, our technicians reported a loss of energy. That may be it."

She spoke solemnly to the medallion. "The captain says his technicians—"

"I heard him. Do you expect me to believe him?"

It was the Queen in her who spoke. "I expect you to check into all possible causes." She turned the medallion off to smile the impish smile at Kirk. "If I had a suspicious nature," she said, "I'd say you sabotaged the Transporter, Captain. To buy time."

"Of course," he said.

She laughed with delight. "Aren't we the innocent pair? I despise devious people, don't you?"

Kirk nodded gravely. "I believe in honest relationships, myself." He hesitated. "Deela, you've never seen my quarters. Before we leave, wouldn't you like to?"

Their eyes met. "Are they like you?" she said. "Austere, efficient —but in their own way, handsome?"

"Yes," he said.

In his cabin, the first thing she went to was his mirror. "Oh, I look a perfect fright! All this running about has left me a perfect fright, hasn't it?"

She lifted a brush from the dresser and flung her head over, the shining hair cascading to the floor. She parted the chestnut curtain with a finger, peeking at him. Then she laughed, tossed the hair back and began to brush it, a delicious woman attracting what she knows her preening has attracted. An electric spark flashed between them.

"Are you married, Captain?"

"No."

"No family, no attachments? Oh, I see. You're married to your career and never look at a woman."

"You're mistaken," he said. "I look, if she's pretty enough."

"I wondered when you'd say something nice to me. Am I more presentable now?"

"A bit," he said.

She was facing him, the brush still in her hand. "It was quite delightful kissing you when you couldn't see me. But now that you do see me, don't you think…?"

He strode to her, took her in his arms and kissed her. She drew back—but he had felt her body tremble. Her arms were reaching for his neck when she whirled out of his embrace, her weapon out. "Unfair!" she cried. "To try and take it in the middle of a kiss!"

She thrust it back into her belt. "But I'll forgive you. I'd have been disappointed in you if you *hadn't* tried to take it!"

"Was I too crude?" Kirk said.

"Just don't try It again, that's all. You're so vulnerable to cell damage. All I have to do is scratch you." She held up pink nails. Then she lifted his arms and placed them around her waist. "You'll come around to our way of thinking sooner or later. And it will be better sooner than later. That's a promise."

In the medical lab, Spock, still functioning in normal time, was about to insert a tape of his own into the computer when McCoy called him. "Have a look at this, Spock. There's no question about it. The same substance is in the captain's coffee as in the Scalosian water. But not a trace of it in the other cups."

Spock spoke to Christine. "Nurse, program that information and see if we can isolate counteragents."

A mosquito whined. Spock, striking at air, turned to McCoy. "Did you just hear—"

"I've been hearing that whine ever since we beamed down to Scalos."

"We brought it with us. And I know what it is. I shall be on the bridge." They stared after him, puzzled, as he raced out of the lab. He was still running when he brought up short on the bridge. "Lieutenant Uhura, replay that Scalosian distress call on my viewer!"

"Yes, sir."

Rael's image appeared on the screen. Spock leaned forward in his chair, waiting for the voice. It came. "Those of us who are left have taken shelter in this area. We have no explanation for what has been happening to us. Our number is now five…"

It was enough. Spock twisted a dial on the viewer; and the voice, rising in pitch, became incoherent babble, went higher still until it turned into recognizable whine. Spock slowed the voice back into words, lifted it up again into the whine—and nodded. On the screen, the image, rushed faster and faster, had first blurred. Then it vanished.

"So," Spock said to nobody.

Back in the lab, McCoy had made a discovery, too. Banging away the whining mosquito at his ear, he spoke into the intercom. "McCoy to Spock."

"Spock, here."

"Did you leave a tape in the computer? I've tried reading it but I get nothing but that whine…"

"Bring it to the bridge at once, Doctor."

Kirk's voice. They listened to it on their separate edges of eternity, each of them reading his own fate in Compton's and Kirk's.

"? Its destruction is imperative. I am dictating this in the presence of their Queen who has denied none of it. Why she has permitted me—"

Deela's voice came. "Because by the time you hear this, it will be too late. The mechanism will be activated…"

Silence fell over the bridge people. Spock leaned swiftly to his console. "I read no change in life support," he said. "Lieutenant Uhura, alert the rest of the crew."

Scott rose and went to him. "We could use phasers to cut through the wall, bypass the force field and get to that mechanism…"

"Mr Scott, we cannot cope with them on our time level."

"Is there a way to cope with them on theirs?"

"A most logical suggestion, Mr Scott. Please stand by in the Transporter Room. Dr McCoy, I should appreciate your assistance."

They left with him, their faces blank with bewilderment. Uhura followed them with her eyes. "Mr Sulu, if nothing has happened yet, wouldn't it mean that the captain has managed to buy time, somehow?"

"Yes," Sulu said. "But how much?"

Rael had restored sufficient energy to the Transporter for a beam-down. But his success had a bitter taste. His fancy persisted in tormenting him with present and future images of Deela with Kirk. Finally, he touched his own medallion.

"Deela…"

She didn't answer. Languorously, she was combing her hair to rights before Kirk's mirror. He watched her from a chair. Then he

got up, smiling at her reflection in the mirror. As he kissed the back of her neck, she turned full into his arms.

"Deela!"

Rael stood in the cabin doorway. The hot fury in him exploded. He reached for her; and seizing a lamp, hurled it at Kirk. Kirk ducked it. Cell damage! In his accelerated state, this could be no ordinary fight. Deela screamed, "Rael, stop it! Don't hurt him! Rael! Captain, get out…"

Grabbing her weapon, she fired it at the lamp. But Rael lunged at Kirk again, barehanded. She fired again, spinning him around with the force beam. "That's enough!" she cried. "Did he damage you, Captain?"

"No."

"How very fortunate for you, Rael! Don't try anything like that again!"

"Then don't torment me. You know what I feel."

"I don't care what you feel. Keep that aspect of it to yourself. What I do is necessary, and you have no right to question it." She paused to add more quietly, "Allow me the dignity of liking the man I select."

He stood sullen but subdued. "Is the Transporter repaired?" she said.

"I have more work to do."

"Then do it." He left. She remained silent, more depressed by the scene than she cared to show. After a long moment, she spoke. "He loves me. I adored him when I was a child. I suppose I still do." She made an effort to recover their former mood. "I must say, you behaved better than he did."

"I hope so," Kirk said.

Something in his manner startled her. "What did you say?"

"That I hope I behaved well."

She was staring at him. "And nothing troubles you now?"

"Why are we here?"

"Our leaving was delayed. Don't you remember? You damaged the Transporter."

"That was wrong," Kirk said.

"It certainly was."

"But we are going to Scalos?"

"Do you want to?"

"Yes."

"What about your crew? Aren't you worried about them?"

"They'll be all right here."

Her mouth twisted with distaste. "What's the matter?" Kirk said.

"You've completely accepted the situation, haven't you? You even like it."

"Am I behaving incorrectly?"

"No." Then she burst out petulantly. "Oh, I liked you better before! Stubborn, independent… and irritating! Like Rael!"

"Those are undesirable qualities," Kirk said.

But she was brooding over her discovery. "Maybe that's why I liked you so much. Because you were like him."

The muscles of Kirk's face ached under the blandness of his smile. But he held it. She touched her medallion. "Rael, you don't have to worry about him. He's made the… adjustment"

McCoy was examining the vial of liquid he had processed. "It's finished," he told Spock wearily.

Spock took the vial; and, mixing some of its contents with the Scalosian water, exposed the result to an electronic device. "It counteracts the substance most effectively, Doctor."

"Under laboratory conditions. The question is, will it work in the human body? And the second question is, how do we get it to the captain?"

Spock poured some of the Scalosian water into a glass. He lifted the glass in a toast to McCoy. "By drinking their water." He drained the glass.

"Spock!" You don't know what the effects—"

But Spock was savoring the taste. "It is… somewhat stimulating." He paused. "And yes, Doctor, you seem to be moving very slowly. Fascinating."

He winked out. McCoy sank down in a chair, his eyes on the vacancy where Spock had stood.

Rael, his face intent, twisted a knob on his refrigerating mechanism. When it flared into red life, he adjusted another one. He nodded to himself as it began to pulsate, its throb dimming the lights of the life support unit. He touched his communicator medallion. "The arrangement is activated, Deela. Go to the Transporter Room and beam-down at once. The others have already left."

Scott was at the console. Unseeing, unmoving, he didn't turn as Kirk entered the room with Deela. Time, time, Kirk thought—was there no way to gain more time? He looked at the Transporter platform that was to maroon him on Scalos, and Deela said, "Come, Captain. We are leaving your pretty ship. Your crew will be all right. You said so yourself."

He smiled at her. "Know something?" he said. "I think I'll make sure of it." Then he caught her; and wrenching her weapon from her belt, ran for the door.

She screamed into her medallion. "Rael! He broke away! He's armed—"

"I'm ready for him!"

Kirk, was racing down the corridor to life support, ducking the stony figures of his crewmen. The beam of a phaser lanced the darkness—and he brought up short. Then he saw Spock. They didn't speak. They didn't need to. A vicious *ping* came from the open life support door. Together, they dodged, split, and, weapons out, plunged through the door.

Rael fired again, missed—and Kirk stunned him with Deela's weapon. At the same moment, Spock's phaser beam struck the Scalosian machine. It continued to flare and throb. Kirk aimed his weapon at it. It burst into flame, melted and was still.

"Nice to see you, Mr Spock," Kirk said.

"Rael!"

It was Deela. She ran to the slumped body, feeling for its heart. Satisfied, she kissed Rael's lips. Then she looked up at Kirk. "You're very clever, Captain. You tricked me. I should have known you'd never adjust." She had Rael in her arms. "What shall we expect from you?"

"We could put you in suspended animation until we determine how to use you," he said. "What do you want us to do with you?"

She was close to tears. "Oh, Captain, don't make a game of this! We've lost. You've won. Dispose of us."

"If I send you back to Scalos, you'll undoubtedly play he same trick on the next space ship that passes."

She was openly weeping now. "There'll never be another one come by. You'll warn them. Your Federation will quarantine this entire area."

"I'm sure it will."

"And we'll die out. We'll solve your problem that way. And ours."

"Will you accept help?" Kirk said. "We can't be helped. I've told you…"

"Madam," Spock said, "I respectfully suggest that as we are advanced beyond your rating on the Industrial Scale, we may be able to be of some help."

"Our best people in the Federation will work on it. Will you accept our offer, Deela, and go in peace?"

Clearly, there were aspects to Kirk's nature she had not suspected. She looked at him wonderingly. After a moment, the old mischief glinted in her green eyes. She shrugged. "What have we to lose?"

She looked down at Rael. He was recovering consciousness. "We have lost," she told him quietly. "It is you and I who will transport down to Scalos." He smiled up at her. "Soon," he said. As they took their places on the platform, Deela turned to Kirk at the console. "Now about your problem, Captain. I note that your Vulcan friend, too, has been accelerated."

Spock spoke. "If you will devote yourself exclusively to the concerns of Scalos, Madam, we shall be very happy to stay and take care of the *Enterprise*."

"Spock," Kirk said, "remind me sometime to tell you how I've missed you."

"Yes, Captain."

"You could find life on Scalos very pleasant, Captain," Deela urged.

"And brief," Kirk said.

"Do I really displease you so much?"

"I can think of nothing I'd like more than staying with you. Except staying alive."

"Will you visit us, Captain?"

"Energize!"

"Captain… Captain… goodbye…" Spock had moved the controls. They dissolved—and were gone. Kirk stared at the empty platform a long moment. Then, turning briskly to Spock, he said, "And now, how do we get back?"

"Doctor McCoy and I have synthesized a possible counteragent to the Scalosian water, sir. Regrettably, we lacked the opportunity to test it."

"Then let's test it." He took the solution Spock gave him and swallowed it. Deela and Rael. It was all for the best. You couldn't

have everything you wanted. Sex—a peculiar magnetic field. Her eyes… like wet green leaves…

Preoccupied, he vaguely heard Spock say, "Your motion seems to be slowing down, sir."

Kirk started to' speak. "Misssssterrr… Spock!" He drew a deep breath. The counteragent had worked. They were back in their own time! Then, abruptly, he realized that Spock hadn't answered. He wheeled—and before his eyes, Spock vanished.

"Spock! Spock, where are you?" Scott came through the door to halt in midstride, "*Captain Kirk!*" he yelled. "Where in blazes did you come from?"

There was no cause to panic. Bones would have more of the counteragent. But Vulcan physiology was a tricky thing. What had worked for him would not necessarily work for Spock. What then? A permanent isolation in an accelerated universe? Kirk had whipped out his communicator before he remembered it was useless, dead as the ship itself. The bridge! He had to get to the bridge! Search parties? Futile. They couldn't see him. If Spock were there beside him, he, Kirk himself, couldn't see him.

He ignored the bridge's hubbub of welcome. Passing Uhura's station, he snapped, "Lieutenant, try to set our recorder at maximum speed…"

"Yes, sir." But the lights on her console had gone mad. The rapidity of their flashing turned them into blur. And all around him other boards and panels were affected by the same dementia. Suddenly, relief engulfed him. Grinning, he spoke to Scott. "I think we've found Mr Spock. Lieutenant Uhura, are your circuits clearing?"

Her face was startled. "Yes, sir."

"Mr Sulu?"

"Clearing, sir."

"Lieutenant Uhura, open all channels." He seized his mike. "Captain to crew. Repairs to the ship are being completed by Mr Spock. We will resume normal operations… just about immediately."

The air beside his chair seemed to thicken. It solidified. Kirk looked at the elegantly pointed ears. "Greetings, Mr Spock. My compliments on your repair work."

"Thank you, Captain. I have found it all a most fascinating experience."

"I'm glad," Kirk said. "I'm glad on many counts." He got up to pace the round of the stations. "Malfunctions—any anywhere?"

Faces beamed at him. He returned to his chair—and the viewing screen lit up. On it the five Scalosians came back into view, Deela's surpassing loveliness transcendent.

"Sorry, sir," Uhura said. "I touched the tape button accidentally."

He leaned back in his chair, eyes on the screen. Deela's face seemed to fill the world. The magnetic field between them—and susceptible to no analysis. The images winked off, leaving the screen blank.

"Goodbye, Deela," he said softly.

THAT WHICH SURVIVES

(John Meredyth Lucas and D. C. Fontana)

The planet on the *Enterprise* screen was an enigma.

Though its age was comparatively young, its vegetation was such as could only evolve on a much older world. Nor could its Earthlike atmosphere be reconciled with the few million years of the existence it had declared to the Starship's sensors. Kirk, over at Spock's station, frowned as he checked the readings. "If we're to give Federation an accurate report, this phenomenon bears investigation, Mr Spock. Dr McCoy and I will beam down for a landing survey. We'll need Senior Geologist D'Amato." He was still frowning when he spoke to Uhura. Teed beamdown coordinates to the Transporter Ensign, Lieutenant." Crossing swiftly to the elevator, he turned his head. "Mr Sulu, you'll accompany me." At the door, he paused. "Mr Spock, you have the con."

The elevator door slid closed; and Spock, crossing to the command chair, hit the intercom. "Lieutenant Radha, report to the bridge immediately."

In the Transporter Room, McCoy and D'Amato were busy checking equipment. Nodding to McCoy, Kirk addressed the geologist. "Mr D'Amato, this expedition should be a geologist's dream. The youth of this planet is not its sole recommendation to you. If Mr Spock is correct, you'll have a report to startle the Fifth Inter-Stellar Geophysical Conference."

"Why, Jim? What is it?" McCoy said.

"Even Spock can't explain its anomalies."

They had taken their positions on the Transporter platform; and Kirk called "Energize!" to the Ensign at the console controls. The sparkle of dematerialization began—and Kirk, amazed, saw a woman, a strange woman, suddenly appear in the space between the platform and the Ensign. She was dark, lovely, with a misty, dreamlike quality about her. He heard her cry out, "Wait! You must not go!" Then, just as he went into shimmer, she moved to the console, her arms outstretched. Before the Ensign could draw

back, she touched him. He gasped, wrenched by convulsion—and slumped to the deck. Kirk disappeared, his eyes blank with horror.

It remained with him as they materialized on the planet. Who was she? How had she gained access to the *Enterprise?* Another enigma. He had no eyes for the blood-red flowers around him, bright against canary-yellow grass. For the rest the planet seemed to be a place of a red, igneous rock, tortured into looming shapes. Far off, black eroded hills jutted up against the horizon. He flipped open his communicator.

"Kirk to *Enterprise.* Come in, *Enterprise*"

McCoy spoke, his voice shocked, "Jim, did you see what I *saw?*"

"Yes, I saw. That woman attacked Ensign Wyatt. *Enterprise,* come in."

The ground shuddered beneath their feet—and the entire planet seemed to go into paroxysm. Hundreds of miles above them, the *Enterprise* trembled like a toy in a giant's hand. There was a bright flash. It vanished.

The landing party sprawled on the ground as the planet's surface continued to pitch and buck. Then it was all over. Sulu, clambering to his feet, said, "What kind of earthquakes do they have in this place?"

Bruised, Kirk got up. "They can't have many like that without tearing the planet apart."

D'Amato spoke. "Captain, just before this tremor—if that's what it was—and it's certainly like no seismic disturbance I've ever seen—I got a tricorder reading of almost immeasurable power. It's gone now."

"Would seismic stress have accounted for it?"

Theoretically, no. The kind of seismic force we felt should have raised new mountains, leveled old ones."

Kirk stooped for his dropped communicator. "Let's see what sort of reading the ship got." He opened it. "Kirk to *Enterprise.*" He waited. Then he tried again. "Kirk to *Enterpriser* There was another wait. "*Enterprise,* come in! Do you read me, *Enterprise?*" He looked at the communicator. "The shock," he said, "may have damaged it."

Sulu had been working his tricorder. Now he looked up, his face stricken. "Captain, the *Enterprise*—it's gone!"

D'Amato was frantically working his controls. Kirk strode to Sulu, moving dials on his instrument. Awed, D'Amato looked at him. "It's true, Captain. There's nothing there."

"Nothing there? Gone? What the devil do you mean?" McCoy cried. "How could the *Enterprise* be gone?" He whirled to Kirk. "What does it mean, Jim?"

"It means," Kirk said slowly, "we're stranded."

Hundreds of miles above, the heaving *Enterprise* had steadied. On the bridge, people struggled up from the deck. Spock held the back of his cracked head and Uhura looked at him anxiously. "Mr Spock, are you all right?"

"I believe no permanent damage is done, Lieutenant."

"What happened?"

"The occipital area of my head impacted with the arm of the chair."

"Sir, I meant what happened to us?"

"That we have yet to ascertain, Lieutenant." He was rubbing the side of his head when the Lieutenant, staring at the screen, cried, "Mr Spock, the planet's gone!"

Scott leaped from his station. "But the Captain! And the others! They were on it!" He eyed the empty screen, his face set. "There's no trace of it at all!"

"Maybe the whole system went supernova," Radha said, her voice shaking. "Those power readings…"

"Please refrain from wild speculation," Spock said. "Mr Scott, engine status reports. Lieutenant Uhura, check damage control. Lieutenant Radha, hold this position. Scan for debris from a possible explosion."

On the planet speculation was also running wild. Sulu, staring at his tricorder, said, "The *Enterprise* must have blown up."

"Mr Sulu, shall we stop guessing and try to work out a pattern? I get no reading of high energy concentrations around the planet. If the *Enterprise* had blown up, there would be high residual radiation."

"Could the *Enterprise* have hit us, Jim? I mean," McCoy said, "hit the planet?"

Sulu said, "Once in Siberia there was a meteor so great it flattened whole forests and—"

"If I'd wanted a Russian-history lesson," Kirk snapped, "I'd have brought Mr Chekov. We face the problem of survival, Mr Sulu. Without the *Enterprise,* we've got to find food and water—and find it fast. I want a detailed analysis of this planet. And I want it now."

His men returned to work.

Up on the *Enterprise,* normal functioning had finally been restored. On the bridge, tension had begun to lessen when Uhura turned from her board. "Mr Spock, Ensign Wyatt, the Transporter officer, is dead."

"Dead?" He punched the intercom button. "Spock to Sickbay."

"Sickbay, Dr M'Benga, sir."

"Report on the death of the Transporter officer."

"We're not sure yet. Dr Sanchez is conducting the autopsy now."

"Full report as soon as possible." Spock turned. "Mr Scott, have the Transporter checked for possible malfunction."

"Aye, sir."

Radha broke in. "No debris of any kind, sir. I made two full scans. If the planet had broken up, we'd have some sign." She hesitated. "What bothers me is the stars, Mr Spock."

He looked up from his console. "The stars?"

"Yes, sir. They're wrong."

"Wrong, Lieutenant?"

"Wrong, sir. Look."

The screen showed a distant pattern of normal star movement; but in the immediate foreground, there were no stars. Radha said, "Here's a replay of the star arrangement just before the explosion, sir." A full starfield appeared on the screen.

"It resembles a *positional* change," Spock said.

"It doesn't make any sense but I'd say that somehow—in a flash—we've been knocked a thousand light years away from where we were."

Spock went swiftly to his viewer. "Nine hundred and ninety point seven light years to be exact, Lieutenant."

"But that's not possible!" Scott cried. "Nothing could do that!"

"It is not logical to assume that the force of an explosion—even of a small star going supernova—could have hurled us a distance of one thousand light years."

Scott had joined him. "The point is, it shouldn't have hurled us anywhere. It should have immediately vaporized us."

"Correct, Mr Scott. By any laws we know. There was no period of unconsciousness; and the ship's chronometers registered only a matter of seconds. We were displaced through space in some manner I am unable to fathom."

Scott beamed. "You're saying the planet didn't blow up! Then the Captain and the others—they're still alive!"

"Mr Scott, please restrain your leaps of illogic. I have not *said* anything. I was merely speculating."

The intercom beeped. "Sickbay to Mr Spock."

"Spock here."

"Dr M'Benga, sir. You asked for the autopsy report. The cause of death seems to have been cellular disruption."

"Explain."

"It's as though each cell of the Ensign's body had been individually blasted from inside."

"Would any known disease organism do that?"

"Dr Sanchez has ruled out that possibility."

"Someone," Spock said, "might have entered the Transporter Room after—or as—the Captain and his party left. Keep me advised, please. Spock out." He looked up at Scott. "Since the *Enterprise* still appears to be in good condition, I suggest we return to our starting point at top warp speed."

"Aye, sir—but even at that, it'll take a good while to get there."

"Then, Mr Scott, we should start at once. Can you give me warp eight?"

"Aye, sir. And perhaps a bit more. I'll sit on those warp engines myself and nurse them."

"Such a position would not only be unfitting but also unavailing, Mr Scott." He spoke to Radha. "Lieutenant, plot a course for—"

"Already plotted and laid in, sir."

"Good. Prepare to come to warp eight."

Kirk was frankly worried. "You're sure your report covers all vegetation, Mr Sulu?"

"Yes, Captain. None of it is edible. It is poison to us."

It was the turn of McCoy's brow to furrow. "Jim, if it's true the ship has been destroyed, you know how long *we* can survive?"

"Yes." Kirk spoke to Sulu. There must be water to grow vegetation, however poisonous. A source of water would at least stretch our survival. Lieutenant D'Amato, is there any evidence of rainfall on this planet?"

"No, sir. I can find no evidence that it has ever experienced rainfall."

"And yet there is Earth-type vegetation here." He looked around him at the poppylike red flowers. "Lieutenant D'Amato, is it possible that there is underground water?"

"Yes, sir."

McCoy broke in. "Sulu has picked up an organism that is almost a virus—some sort of plant parasite. That's the closest to a mobile life form that's turned up."

Kirk nodded. "If this is to be our home as long as we last, we'd better find out as much about it as we can. D'Amato, see if you can find any sub-surface water. Sulu, run an atmospheric analysis."

As the two men moved off in opposite directions, Kirk turned to McCoy. "Bones, discover what you can about the vegetation and your parasites. How do they get their moisture? If you can find out how they survive, maybe we can. I'll see if I can locate some natural shelter for us."

"Are you sure we *want* to survive as a bunch of Robinson Crusoes? If we had some wood to make a fire and some animals to hunt, we could chew their bones sitting around our caveman fire and—"

"Bones, go catch us a parasite, will you?"

McCoy grinned; adjusting his medical tricorder, he knelt to study the yellow grass. Kirk got a fix on a landmark and made off around the angle of a cliff. It wasn't too distant from the large rock formation where Sulu was taking his readings. Setting the dials on his tricorder, he halted abruptly, staring at them. Puzzled, he examined them again—and grabbed for his communicator.

"Sulu to Captain!"

"Kirk here."

"Sir, I was making a standard magnetic sweep. From zero I suddenly got a reading that was off the scale… then a reverse of polarity. Now again I get nothing."

"Have you checked your tricorder for damage? The shaking it took was pretty rough."

"I've checked it, Captain. I'll break it down again. But I've never seen anything like this reading. Like a door opened and then closed again."

Meanwhile, D'Amato had come upon a vein of the red igneous rock in the cliff face. Its elaborate convolutions seemed too complex to be natural. Intrigued, he aimed his tricorder at it. At once its dials spun wildly—and the ground under his feet quaked, pitching him to his knees. As he scrambled up, there came a flash of blinding light. When it subsided, he saw the woman. She was dark and lovely; but the misty, dreamlike expression of her face was lost in the shadow of the cliff.

"Don't be afraid," she said.

"I'm not. Geological disturbances do not frighten me. They're my business. I came here to study them."

"I know. You are Lieutenant D'Amato, Senior Geologist."

"How do you know that?"

"And from the Starship *Enterprise.*"

"You've been talking to my friends?"

She had come slowly forward, her hand outstretched. He stepped back and she said, "I am for you, D'Amato."

Recognition had suddenly flooded him. "You are the woman on the *Enterprise,*" he said slowly.

"Not I. I am only for D'Amato."

In the full light her dark beauty shone with a luster of its own. It disconcerted him. "Lucky D'Amato," he said—and reached for his communicator. "First, let's all have a little conference about sharing your food and water."

She stepped closer to him. "Do not call the others… please…"

The voice was music. The grace of her movement held him as spellbound as her loveliness. The last thing he remembered was the look of ineffable sadness on her face as her delicate fingers moved up his arm…

"McCoy to Kirk!"

"Kirk here, Bones."

"Jim! I've just got a life form reading of tremendous intensity! It was suddenly just there!"

"What do you mean—just there?"

"That. All tricorder levels were normal when this surge of biological life suddenly registered! Wait a minute! No, it's gone…"

Kirk's jaw hardened. "As though a door had opened and closed again?"

"Yes."

"What direction?"

"Zero eight three."

"D'Amato's section!" Tensely, Kirk moved a dial on his communicator. "Kirk to D'Amato!" He paused, intent. "Come in, D'Amato!"

When he spoke again, his voice was toneless. "Bones, Sulu—D'Amato doesn't answer."

"On my way!" McCoy shouted. Kirk broke into a run along the cliff base. In the distance, he saw McCoy and Sulu racing toward him. As they converged upon him, he halted abruptly, staring down into a crevice between the cliff and a huge red rock. "Bones—here!"

The body was wedged in the crevice. McCoy, tricorder in hand, stooped over it. Then he looked up, his eyes appalled. "Jim, every cell in D'Amato's body has been—disrupted!"

Time limped by as they struggled to comprehend the horror's meaning. Finally, Kirk pulled his phaser. Very carefully he paced out the rectangular measurements of a grave. Then he fired the phaser. Six inches of soil vaporized, exposing a substratum of red rock. He fired the phaser again—but the rock resisted its beam. He aimed it once more at another spot; and once more its top soil disappeared but the rock beneath it remained—untouched, unscarred. He spoke grimly. "Better than eight thousand degrees centigrade. It just looks like igneous rock, but it's infinitely denser."

McCoy said, "Jim, is the whole planet composed of this substance covered over by top soil?"

Kirk snapped off his phaser. "Lieutenant Sulu, it might help explain this place if we knew exactly what this rock is. I know it is Lieutenant D'Amato's field—but see what you can find out."

Sulu unslung his tricorder. As they watched him stoop over the first excavation, McCoy said, "I guess a tomb of rocks is the best we can provide for D'Amato." They were collecting stones for the cairn when Kirk straightened up. "I wonder if the Transporter officer on the *Enterprise* is dead, Bones."

"You mean that woman we saw may have killed him?"

Kirk looked around him. "Someone killed D'Amato." He bent again to the work of assembling stones. Then, silently, they dislodged D'Amato's body from the crevice. When it had been hidden under the heaped stones, they all stood for a moment, heads bowed. Sulu shivered slightly. "It looks so lonely there."

"It would be worse if he had company," McCoy said.

Sulu flushed. "Doctor, how can you joke about it? Poor D'Amato, what a terrible way to die."

"There aren't really any good ways, Lieutenant Sulu. Nor am, I joking. Until we know what killed him, none of us is safe."

"Right, Bones," Kirk said. "We'd better stick together, figure this out, and devise a defense against it. Is it possible the rock itself has life?"

Sulu said, "You remember on Janus Six the silicon creatures that __"

McCoy cut in. "But our instruments recorded them. They registered as life forms."

"We could be dealing with intelligent beings who are able to shield their presence."

Sulu stared at Kirk's thoughtful face. "Beings intelligent enough to have destroyed the *Enterprise?*"

"That's our trouble, Lieutenant. All we've got is questions. Questions—and no answers."

In his apparent safety on the *Enterprise,* Scott, too, was wrestling with a question to which there seemed to be no sane answer. His sense of suspense grew until he finally pushed the intercom button in his Engineering section.

"Spock here, Mr Scott."

"Mr Spock, the ship feels wrong."

"*Feels,* Mr Scott?"

Both troubled and embarrassed, Scott fumbled for words. "I—I know it doesn't… make sense, sir. Instrumentation reads correct—but the *feel* is wrong. It's something I… don't know how to say…"

"Obviously, Mr Scott. I suggest you avoid emotionalism and simply keep your readings 'correct'. Spock out."

But he hesitated just the same. Finally, he crossed over to his sensor board.

Down in Engineering, Scott, frowning, studied his control panel before turning to an assistant. "Watkins, check the bypass valves for the matter-anti-matter reaction chamber. Be sure there's no overheating."

"But, Mr Scott, the board shows—"

"I didn't ask you to check the board, lad!"

"Yes, sir." Watkins wiped smudge off his hands. Then, crossing the engine room, he entered the small alcove that housed the matter-anti-matter reaction-control unit. He was nearing its display panel when he saw the woman standing in the corner. Startled, he said, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

She smiled a little sadly. "My name is not important. Yours is Watkins, John B. Engineer, grade four."

He eyed her. "You seem to know all about me. Very flattering. What department are you? I've never seen that uniform."

"Show me this unit, please. I wish to learn."

Suspicion tightened in him. He covered it quickly. "This is the matter-anti-matter integrator control. That's the cutoff switch."

"Incorrect," she said. "On the contrary, that is the emergency overload bypass valve which engages almost instantaneously. A wise precaution."

Frightened now, Watkins backed away from her until he was stopped by the mass of the machine. She was smiling lie sad little smile again. "Wise," she said, "considering the fact it takes the anti-matter nacelles little longer to explode once the magnetic valves fail." She paused. "I'm for you, Mr Watkins."

"Watkins! What's taking you so long?" Scott shouted.

The woman extended a hand as though to repress his reply. But Watkins yelled, "Sir, there's a strange woman here who knows the entire plan of the ship!"

Scott had raced across the Engine Room to the reaction chamber. "Watkins, what the de'il—?" As he rushed in, the woman, backed against a wall, suddenly seemed to flip sideways, her image a thin, two-dimensional line. Then she vanished.

Scott looked down at the alcove's floor. His look of annoyance changed to one of shock. "Poor, poor laddie," he whispered. Then he was stumbling to the nearest intercom button. "Scott to bridge," he said, his voice shaking.

"Spock here, Mr Scott."

"My engineering assistant is dead, sir."

There was a pause before Spock said, "Do you know how he died, Mr Scott?"

The quiet voice steadied Scott. "I didn't see it happen. His last words… warned about some strange woman…"

Spock reached for his loud speaker. "Security alert! All decks! Woman intruder! Extremely dangerous!"

Sulu had finally managed to identify the basic material of the planet. Looking up from his tricorder, he said, "It's an alloy, Captain. Diburnium and osmium. It could not have evolved naturally."

Kirk nodded. "Aside from momentary fluctuations on our instruments, this planet has no magnetic field. And the age of this rock adds up to only a few million years. In that time no known process could have evolved its kind of plant life."

"Jim, are you suggesting that this is an artificial planet?"

"If it's artificial," Sulu said, "where are the people who made it? Why don't we see them?"

"It could be hollow," Kirk told him. "Or they could be shielded against our sensor probes." He looked around him at the somber landscape. "It's getting dark; get some rest. In the morning we'll have to find water and food quickly—or we're in for a very unpleasant stay."

"While the stay lasts," McCoy said grimly.

"Sir, I'll take the first watch."

"Right, Mr Sulu. Set D'Amato's tricorder for automatic distress on the chance that a spaceship might come by." He stretched out on the ground and McCoy crouched down beside him.

"Jim, if the creators of this planet were going to live inside it, why would they bother to make an atmosphere and evolve plant life on its surface?"

"Bones, get some rest."

McCoy nodded glumly.

Spock wasn't feeling so cheerful, either. Though Sickbay had reported the cellular disruption of Watkins's body to be the same that had killed the Transporter Ensign, its doctors could not

account for its cause. “My guess is as good as yours,” M’Benga had told him.

Guesses, Spock thought, when what is needed are facts. He spoke sharply to M’Benga. “The power of this intruder to disrupt every cell in a body… combined with the the almost inconceivable power to hurl the *Enterprise* such a distance, speak of a very high culture—and a very great danger.”

Scott spoke. “You mean one of the people who threw us a thousand light years away from that planet is on board this ship, killing our crew?”

“That would be the reasonable assumption, Mr Scott.”

Scott pondered. “Yes. Watkins must have been murdered.” He paused. “I’d sent him to check the matter-anti-matter reactor. There are no exposed circuits there. It can’t have been anything he touched.”

“If there are more of those beings on that planet, Mr Scott, the Captain and the others are in very grave danger.”

Danger. Kirk stirred restlessly in his sleep. Near him the tricorder beeped its steady distress signal. Sulu, on guard, shoulders hunched against the cold, felt the ground under him begin to tremble. The strange light flared through the dark. Kirk and McCoy sat up.

“Lieutenant Sulu?”

“It’s all right, Captain. Just another one of those quakes.”

“What was that light?” McCoy said.

“Lightning, probably. Get some rest, sir.”

They lay back. Sulu got up to peer into the darkness around him, patrolling a wider circle. He approached the beeping tricorder, looked down at it, and was moving on when the signal stopped. Sulu whirled—and saw the woman. He went for his phaser, pulling it in one swift movement.

“I am unarmed, Mr Sulu,” she said.

Hand on phaser, he advanced toward her cautiously. She stood perfectly still, her face blurred by the darkness.

“Who are you?” he said.

That is not important. You are Lieutenant Sulu; you were born on the planet Earth—and you are helmsman of the *Enterprise.*”

"Where did you get that information?" he demanded. "Do you live on this planet?"

"I am from here."

Then the planet *was* hollow. Rage suddenly shook him. "Who killed Lieutenant D'Amato?"

She didn't speak, and Sulu snapped, "All right! My Captain will want to talk to you!" He gestured with his phaser. "That way. Move!"

The melodious voice said, "You do not understand. I have come to you."

"What do you want?"

"To—touch you…"

He was in no mood for her touching. "One of our men has been killed! We are marooned here—and our ship has disappeared!" Her features were growing clearer. "You—I recognize you! You were in the *Enterprise!*"

"Not I. Another." She started toward him.

"Keep back!"

But she continued her move to him. He lifted his phaser. "Stop! Or I'll fire!"

She maintained her approach. "Stop!" he cried. "I don't want to kill a woman!"

She was close to him now. He fired, vaporizing the ground before her. She still came on. Sulu turned his phaser to full charge —and fired again. The beam struck her, but made no more impression on her than it had made on the rock. He backed away, but stumbled over a stone behind him. The phaser skittered across the hard surface of the planet. He scrambled up—but she was on top of him, her hand on his shoulder. He leaped clear, screaming in agony. Then he fell to the ground, his face contorted, screams tearing from his throat. The woman reached for him, her arms outstretched.

"Hold it!"

Kirk, phaser aimed, had interposed himself between them. The woman hesitated, startled.

"Who are you?" Kirk snapped.

"I am for Lieutenant Sulu."

Sulu was clutching his shoulder, groaning. "Phasers won't stop her, Captain… don't let her touch you… it's how D'Amato died. It's… like being blown apart…"

The woman moved to go around Kirk. Again, he blocked her way to Sulu. "Please," she said. "I must. I am for Lieutenant Sulu."

McCoy had joined them. "She's mad!" he cried.

"Bones, take care of Sulu." Kirk eyed the woman, her dark loveliness, her misty, dreamlike state. He had to fight his mounting horror as he recognized her. "Please, please," she said again. "I must touch him."

Once more she advanced—and once more Kirk shielded Sulu with his body. They collided. Her outstretched arms were around his neck. He felt nothing but revulsion. Shoving her away, he said, "Why can you destroy others—and not *me?'*

She looked at him, her eyes tortured. "I don't want to destroy. I don't *want* to…"

"Who are you? Why are you trying to kill us?"

"Only Sulu. I wish you no harm, Kirk. We are—much alike. Under the circumstances—" She broke off.

"Are there men on this planet?" Kirk demanded.

"I must touch him."

"No."

She stepped back. Then she flipped sideways, leaving only a line that thinned—and disappeared.

Kirk stared at the empty space. "Did you see that, Bones? Is this a ghost planet?"

"All I know is that thing almost made a ghost of Sulu! His shoulder where she touched him—its cells are disrupted, exploded from within. If she'd got a good grip…"

"Why? It's true we must seem like intruders here, but if she reads our minds, she must know we mean no harm. Why the killing, Bones?"

Sulu looked up at him. "Captain, how can such people be? Such evil? And she's—she's so beautiful…"

"Yes," he said slowly. "I noticed…"

Spock had changed the red alert to an increase of security guards. Sweep after sweep had failed to show evidence of any intruder. Uhura, bewildered, turned to him.

"But how did she get off the ship, Mr Spock?

"Presumably the same way she got on, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." She spoke again, anxiously. "Mr Spock, what are the chances of the Captain and the others being alive?"

"We're not engaged in gambling, Lieutenant. We are proceeding in the logical way to return as fast as possible to the place they were last seen. It is the reasonable method to ascertain whether or not they are still alive."

Radha spoke from where she was monitoring her station's instruments. "Mr Spock, speed is increased to warp eight point eight."

He crossed hastily to the command chair. "Bridge to Engineering," he said into the intercom.

"Scott here, sir. I see it. It's a power surge. I'm working on it. Suggest we reduce speed until we locate the trouble."

"Very well Mr Scott." He turned to Radha. "Reduce speed to warp seven."

"Aye, sir. Warp seven." Then, as she looked at her board, her eyes widened. "Mr Spock! Our speed has increased to warp eight point nine and still climbing!"

Spock pushed the intercom button. "Bridge to Scott. Negative effect on power reduction, Mr Scott. Speed is still increasing."

Scott, down in the matter-anti-matter reaction chamber, looked at the unit that had witnessed Watkins's death. "Aye, Mr Spock," he said slowly. "And I've found out why. The emergency bypass control valve for the matter-anti-matter integrator is fused—completely useless. The engines are running wild. There's no way to get at them. We should reach maximum overload in fifteen minutes."

Spock said, "I calculate fourteen point eight seven minutes, Mr Scott."

The voice from Engineering had desperation in it. "Those few seconds won't make much difference, sir. Because you, I, and the rest of this crew will no longer be here to argue about it. This ship is going to blow up and nothing in the universe can stop it."

Around Spock, faces had gone blank with shock.

Sulu's pain had begun to ease. McCoy, still working on his shoulder, looked up at Kirk. "There's a layer of necrotic tissue, subcutaneous, a few cells thick. A normal wound should heal quickly. But if it isn't, if this is an infection…"

"You mean your viruses?" Kirk said.

"It couldn't be! Not so quickly!"

"She just touched me, sir," Sulu said. "How could it happen so fast?"

"She touched the Transporter Ensign. He collapsed immediately. Then she got to D'Amato and we saw what happened to him." Kirk looked down at Sulu. "Why are you alive, Lieutenant?"

"Captain, I'm very grateful for the way it turned out. Thank you for all you did."

"Jim, what kind of power do they wield, anyway?"

"The power, apparently, to totally disrupt biological cell structure."

"Why didn't she kill you?"

"She's not through yet, Bones."

Spock had joined Scott in the matter-anti-matter chamber. As the Engineer rose from another examination of the unit, he shook his head. "It's useless. There's no question it was deliberate."

"Sabotage," Spock said.

"Aye—and a thorough job. The system's foolproof. Whoever killed Watkins sabotaged this."

"You said it's been fused, Mr Scott. How?"

"That's what worries me. It's fused all right—but it would take the power of the ship's main phaser banks to have done it."

"Interesting," Spock mused.

"I find nothing interesting in the fact we're about to blow up, sir!" Scott was glaring at Spock.

The Vulcan didn't appear to notice it. "No," he agreed mildly. "But the *method* is extremely interesting, Mr Scott."

"Whoever did this must still be loose in the ship! I fail to understand why you canceled the red alert."

"A force able to fling us a thousand light years away and yet manage to sabotage our main energy source will not be waiting around to be taken into custody." He put the result of his silent musings into words. "As I recall the pattern of fuel flow, there is an access tube, is there not, that leads into the matter-antimatter reaction chamber?"

"Aye," Scott said grudgingly. "There's a service crawlway. But it's not meant to be used while the integrator operates."

"However, it's there," Spock said. "It might be possible to shut off the flow at that point"

Scott exploded. "With what? Bare hands?"

"No, Mr Scott. With a magnetic probe."

"Any matter that comes into contact with the antimatter triggers the explosion. I'm not even sure a man could live in the crawlway —in the energy stream of the magnetic field that bottles up the anti-matter."

"I shall try," Spock said.

"You'd be killed, man!"

"That fate awaits all of us unless a solution can be found very quickly."

Scott stared at him with mingled admiration and annoyance. There was a pause. Then he said, "Aye, you're right. We've nothing to lose. But *I'll* do it, Mr Spock. I know every millimeter of the system. I'll do whatever must be done."

"Very well, Mr Scott. You spoke, I remember, of the 'feel' of the ship being 'wrong'."

"It was an emotional statement. I don't expect you to understand it, Mr Spock."

"I hear, Mr Scott, without necessarily understanding. It is my intention to put an analysis through the ship's computers comparing the present condition of the *Enterprise* with her ideal condition."

"We've no time for that!"

"We have twelve minutes and twenty-seven seconds. I suggest you do what you can in the service crawlway while I return to the bridge to make the computer study."

Scott's harassed eyes followed him as he left. Shaking his head, he turned to several crewmen. "Lads, come with me."

They followed him quickly.

Down on the planet Kirk had also indulged some musings. As he watched McCoy check Sulu again, he said, "If this planet is hollow —if there are cities and power sources under the surface, there should be entrances. We'll do our exploring together. Lieutenant Sulu, do you feel strong enough to move now?"

"I feel fine, Captain."

"Is he, Bones?"

"He's back in one piece again."

"Whatever destructive power that woman has is aimed at a specific person at a specific time. If I'm correct, when she appears again, the other two of us may be able to protect the one she's after. And simply by intruding our bodies between her and her victim. No weapons affect her."

"But how does she know about us, Captain? She knew my name, my rank—even the name of the ship! She must read our minds—" Sulu broke off at the sound of a whining noise that rose rapidly in pitch. "Captain! That's a phaser on overload!"

But Kirk had already whipped his weapon from his belt. "The control's fused," he said. "Drop."

Sulu and McCoy hit the ground. Kirk, flinging his phaser away with the full force of his strength, also fell flat, his arms shielding his head. They acted just in time. There was an ear-splitting roar of explosion. Debris rained down on them. Then it was over. Kirk got to his feet, looking around him.

"That answers our question," he said. "She *does* read our minds. Let's go…"

The crawlway was dark and narrow. Scott, two of his men, beside him, peered up through it. "All right," he said. "Help me up into it." Wriggling through the cramped space, a corner faced him. He edged around it, the heat of the energy stream meeting him. It flowed over him, enveloping him in a dim glow. He spoke into the open communicator beside him, his voice muffled. "Scott to bridge."

"Go ahead, Mr Scott."

"I've sealed off the aft end of the crawlway. And I've positioned explosive separator charges so you can blow me clear of the ship if I rupture the magnetic bottle. I'm so close to it now that the flow around me feels like ants crawling all over my body."

"Mr Scott, I suggest you do not engage in any further subjective descriptions. You have precisely ten minutes and nineteen seconds to perform your task."

Radha turned from her console. "Mr Spock, we're at warp eleven point two and accelerating."

From the crawlway, Scott said, "I heard that. The ship's not structured to take that speed for any length of time."

"Mr Scott, you now have ten minutes, ten seconds."

The hot glow in the crawlway was enervating. Every inch of Scott's body was tingling. "All right, Mr Spock, I'm not opening the access panel to the magnetic flow valve itself. Keep your eye on that dial. If there's a jump in magnetic flow, you must jettison me. The safety control can't hold more than two seconds after rupture of the magnetic field."

"I am aware of these facts, Mr Scott. Please get on with the job."

Spock had moved to his station, twisting dials. Now, pushing the computer button, he said, "Computer."

The metallic voice said, "Working."

"Analysis on comparison coordinates."

Three clicks came in succession before the computer said, "Unable to comply. Comparison coordinates too complex for immediate readout. Will advise upon completion."

Scott spoke again. "I've removed the access plate and I've got static electric charges dancing along the instruments. It looks like the aurora borealis in here."

Spock turned to Uhura. "You're monitoring the magnetic force?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't take your eyes off it." His quiet face showed no sign of strain. "Lieutenant Radha, arm the pod jettison system."

"Aye, sir." She moved a toggle. "I'll jettison the pod at the first sign of trouble."

"Only on my order!" Spock snapped.

"Yes, sir. Warp eleven point nine now."

Spock used the intercom. "Mr Scott, what's your situation?"

In the access tube, sparks were flying from all the metal surfaces. Scott himself seemed encompassed by a nimbus of flowing flames. "It's hard to see. There's so much disturbance I'm afraid any attempt to get at the flow valve will interrupt the magnetic shield."

"You have eight minutes forty-one seconds."

To himself, Scott muttered, "I know what time it is. I don't need a bloody cuckoo clock."

The three on the planet had reached a plateau of the red rock. They paused for rest; checking his tricorder, Sulu cried, "Captain!

There's that strange magnetic sweep again! From zero to off the scale and then—"

"Like a door opening…" Kirk muttered.

From behind a jutting rock stepped the woman, the dreamy smile on her lovely mouth.

"And who have you come for this time?" Kirk said.

"For you, James T. Kirk, Captain of the *Enterprise.*"

McCoy and Sulu stepped quickly in front of Kirk. "Keep behind us, Jim!" McCoy shouted.

She was standing quite still, her short, flowing garment clinging to the lines of her slim body.

Kirk spoke over McCoy's shoulder. "Why do you want to kill me?"

"You are an invader."

She moved forward and he spoke again. "We're here on a peaceful mission. We have not harmed you. Yet you have killed our people."

McCoy had his tricorder focused on her. Reading it, he said amazedly, "Jim, I get no life reading from her!"

"An android," Sulu said.

"That would give a mechanical reading. I get nothing."

Warily maintaining his place behind his men, Kirk said, "Who are you?"

"Commander Losira."

"Commander of what?"

"This base," she said.

Kirk studied her exquisite features. "You are very beautiful, Losira. You—appeal to me."

Stunned, McCoy and Sulu turned their heads to stare at him. The woman trembled slightly. Kirk noted it with satisfaction. "Do I appeal to you, Losira?"

She lowered her dark eyes. "At another time we might have—" She broke off.

"How do you feel about killing me?" Kirk said.

The eyelids lifted and her head came up. "Feel?" she asked. Then, very slowly, she added, "Killing is wrong." But nevertheless, she took another step forward. "You must not penetrate this station." Her arms stretched out. "Kirk, I must—touch you."

Behind his shielding two men, Kirk was frantically working at his tricorder. Where was the door? She must have emerged from

somewhere! But as he worked, he talked. "You want to kill me?"

She stopped her advance, confused. "You *don't* want to," he said. "Then why do you do it if you don't want to?"

"I am sent," she said.

"By whom?"

"We defend this place."

"Where are the others?"

"No more." Abruptly, determination seemed to possess her again. She ran to them, arms out, struggling to get past McCoy and Sulu. They remained, immovable before Kirk, her touch leaving them unaffected.

"How long have you been alone?" Kirk said.

Her arms dropped. A look of depthless sorrow came over her face. Then, turning sideways, she was a line that vanished in a flash of light.

"Where did she go?" McCoy cried. "She must be somewhere!"

"She isn't registering," Sulu said. "But there's that power surge again on my tricorder! Bight off the scale! The place must be near here."

"Like a door… closing," Kirk said. He moved forward toward a big, distant, red rock.

The bridge chronometer was marking the swiftly passing seconds. Spock left the helm position to hit his computer button. "Computer readout," he said.

"Comparison analysis complete."

"Continue."

"Transporter factor M-7. Reassembled outphase point zero, zero, zero, nine."

Spock's eyebrows arched in astonishment; and Radha called, "Fifty-seven seconds to go, sir."

"Understood," Spock said. Radha watched him unhurriedly study the readout—and had to struggle for calm. Nor did he raise his head from his view box when Scott's blurred voice came from the intercom. "Mr Spock."

"Spock here, Mr Scott."

In the crawlway sweat beaded Scott's forehead. Vari-colored light played over his face as he cautiously eased two complex instruments toward the access hatch. "I'm going to try to cut

through the magnetic valve. But if the probe doesn't exactly match the flow, there'll be an explosion—starting now." He crept forward with agonizing care.

Radha, her face drawn with strain, had poised her finger ready to activate the jettison button. Uhura cried, "Mr Spock, magnetic force indicator's jumping!"

Spock came out of his scope. "Mr Scott, ease off," he said.

As Scott withdrew his instruments, the tempo of light fluctuation slowed. Uhura, eyes on her console, said, "Magnetic force back to normal, sir."

Radha, with forced composure, spoke. "Warp thirteen point two, Mr Spock."

If he heard, he gave no sign. "Computer, for out-phase condition, will reversed field achieve closure?"

"Affirmative if M-7 factor maintained."

Spock struck the intercom. "Mr Scott, reverse polarity in your magnetic probe."

"Reverse polarity?"

"That is correct, Mr Scott."

"But that'll take a bit of doing and what pur-pose—?"

"Get started, Mr Scott. I shall explain. You were right in your 'feel'. The *Enterprise* was put through a molecular transporter. Then it was reassembled slightly out of phase. Reversed polarity should seal the incision."

"I've no time for theory, but I hope you're right."

Radha said, "Fifteen seconds, Mr Spock."

In the crawlway Scott heard her. "I'm doing the best I can. Wait—it's stuck." He struggled frantically with the magnetic probe, the sweat dropping into his eyes.

"Ten seconds," Radha said.

"I'm stuck," Scott said. "Blast me loose."

"Keep working, Mr Scott."

"Don't be a fool, Spock. It's your last chance. Push that jettison button. Don't be sentimental. Push it. I'm going to die, anyway."

"Stop talking," Spock said. "Work."

Scott retrieved the probe. The control came free. He shoved it quickly into the access hatch. "It's loose now. But there's no time. Press the button." Lights flared wildly around him as the probe sank deeper into its hole.

Spock was at Radha's station. The needle on her dial had climbed to warp fourteen point one. Uhura, looking across at him, said, "Magnetic force meter is steady, sir."

As she spoke, the needle on Radha's dial had sunk to warp thirteen. It continued to drop. Spock flipped the intercom. "Mr Scott, you have accomplished your purpose."

Scott disengaged the magnetic probe. Then his head fell on the hot metal of the tube. "You might at least say thank you, Mr Spock."

Spock was genuinely astounded. "For what purpose, Mr Scott? What is it in you that requires an overwhelming display of emotion in a situation such as this? Two men pursue their only reasonable course—and you clearly seem to feel something more is necessary. What?"

"Never mind," Scott said wearily. I'm sorry I brought it up."

The three stranded *Enterprise* men were nearing the big, red rock. And the readings on Sulu's tricorder still showed off the scale beyond their peak. Kirk approached the rock. "That closed door," he said, "must be right here."

They all shoved their shoulders against the rock. It didn't move. Panting, McCoy said, "If that's a closed door, it intends to stay closed."

The rock of itself slid to one side. It revealed a door that suddenly telescoped and drew upward. They stood in silence for a moment, peering inward.

"You think it's an invitation to go in?" McCoy said.

"If it is," Sulu said, "it's one that doesn't exactly relax me."

"The elevator door on the Enterprise bridge would be certainly preferable," Kirk agreed. "But whatever civilization exists on this planet is in there. And without the ship, gentlemen, in there is our sole source of food and water."

Following his lead, they cautiously moved through the doorway. It gave onto a large chamber. Athwart its entrance was a huge translucent cube. Pulsing in a thousand colors, lights flashed across its surfaces. "What is it?" Kirk said. "Does it house the brain that operates this place?" They were studying the cube when, between it and them, the woman appeared, wearing that same look of sadness. She moved toward them slowly.

"Tell us who you are for," Kirk said.

She didn't answer; but her arm rose and her pace increased.

"Form a circle," Kirk said. "Keep moving."

The woman halted. "You see," Kirk said, "you might as well tell us who you're for." He paused. "On the other hand, don't bother. You are still for Kirk."

"I am for James Kirk," she said.

McCoy and Sulu drew together in front of him as he said, "But James Kirk is not for you."

"Let me touch you-—I beg it," she said. "It is my existence."

"It is my death," he said.

Her voice was very gentle. "I do not kill," she said.

"No? We have seen the results of your touch."

"But you are my match, James Kirk. I must touch you. Then I will live as your match even to the structure of your cells—the arrangement of chromosomes. I need you."

"That is how you kill. You will never reach me." Even as he spoke, he saw the second woman. Silently, unnoticed, she was moving toward them, arms outstretched. "Watch out!" he shouted.

"I am for McCoy," said the second woman.

Kirk jumped in front of Bones. "They are replicas!" he cried. "The computer there has programmed replicas!"

"They match our chromosome patterns after they touch us!" McCoy shouted.

A third woman, identical in beauty and clothing, slipped into view. "I am for Sulu," she said.

Aghast, the *Enterprise* men stared at each other. "Captain! We can no longer protect each other!"

McCoy said, "We could each make a rush at the other's killer!"

"It's worth a try," Kirk said.

Unhearing, dreamy, their arms extended, the trio of women were nearing them, closing in, closer and closer. Beside them, the air suddenly gathered into shimmer. Armed with phasers, Spock and an *Enterprise* security guard materialized swiftly. They swung their weapons around to cover the women.

"No, Spock!" Kirk yelled. "That cubed computer-destroy it!"

The phasers' beams struck the pulsing cube. There was a blast of iridescent light—and the women vanished. McCoy drew a great gasping sigh of incredulous relief. Kirk turned to Spock. "Mr Spock, it is an understatement to say I am pleased to see you. I thought you and the *Enterprise* had been destroyed."

Spock holstered his phaser. "I had the same misgivings about you, Captain. We got back close enough to this planet to pick up your life form readings only a moment ago."

"Got back from where, Mr Spock?"

But Spock was examining the broken cube with obvious admiration. "From where this brain had the power to send the ship… a thousand light years across the galaxy. What a magnificent culture this is."

"Was, Mr Spock. Its defenses were run by computer."

Spock nodded. "I surmised that, Captain. Its moves were all immensely logical. But what people created it? Are there any representatives of them?"

"There were replicas of one of them. But now the power to reproduce them has been destroyed. Your phasers—" He stopped. On the blank wall of the chamber Losira's face was gradually forming. The lovely lips opened. "My fellow Kalandans, I greet you."

She went on. "A disease is decimating us. Beware of it. I regret giving you only this recorded warning—but we who have guarded this outpost for you may be dead by the time you hear it."

The voice faded. After a moment it resumed. "In creating this planet, we also created a deadly organism. I have awaited the regular supply ship from our home star with medical assistance, but I am now sickening with the virus myself. I shall set the outpost's controls on automatic. They will defend you against all enemies except the disease. My fellow Kalandans, I wish you well."

"She is wishing the dead well," McCoy said.

Spock had returned to the blasted computer. "It must have projected replicas of the only being available—Losira."

Kirk's eyes were on the dissolving image. "She was—beautiful," he said.

Spock shook his head. "Beauty is transitory, Captain. She was, however, loyal and highly intelligent."

The image on the wall had gone. Kirk opened his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Five of us to beam up. By the way, Mr Spock, I don't agree with you."

"Indeed, Captain?"

In Kirk's mind was the remembered sound of a voice like music, of a dark and lonely loveliness waiting in vain for the salvation of her people. "Beauty survives, Mr Spock. It survives in the memory of those who beheld it."

Spock stared at him. As they dematerialized, there was a sad little smile on Kirk’s lips.

LET THAT BE YOUR LAST BATTLEFIELD

(Oliver Crawford and Lee Cronin)

An airborne epidemic was raging on Ariannus; the *Enterprise* was three hours and four minutes out from the stricken planet on a decontamination mission when her sensors picked up, of all unexpected objects, a Starfleet shuttlecraft. Furthermore, its identification numbers showed it to be the one reported stolen from Starbase 4 two weeks earlier.

Its course was very erratic, and it was leaking air. There was a humanoid creature aboard, either injured or ill. Kirk had the machine brought aboard by tractor, and then came the second surprise. The unconscious creature aboard it was, on his left side, a very black man—while his right-hand side was completely white.

Kirk and Spock, curious, watched the entity, now on the surgery's examination table, while McCoy and Nurse Chapel did what seemed indicated. This, in due course, included an injection.

"Doctor," Spock said, "is this pigmentation a natural condition of this—individual?"

"So it would seem. The black side is plain ordinary melanin."

"I never heard of such a race," Kirk said. "Spock? No? I thought not. How do you explain it, Bones?"

"At the moment, I don't."

"He looks like the outcome of a drastic argument."

"I would think not," Spock said seriously. "True, he would be difficult to account for by standard Mendelian evolution, but unaccountable rarities do occur."

"A mutation?" McCoy said. "Tenable, anyhow."

"Your prognosis, Bones?"

"Again, I can't give one. He's a novelty to me, too."

"Yet," Spock said, "you are pumping him full of your noxious potions as if he were human."

"When in doubt, the book prevails. I've run tests. Blood is blood—even when it's green like yours. The usual organs are there,

somewhat rearranged, plus a few I don't recognize. But—well, judge the treatment by its fruits; he's coming around." The alien's eyes blinked open. He looked as though he were frightened, but trying not to show it.

"Touch and go there for a bit," McCoy said. "But you're no longer in danger."

"You are aboard the Starship *Enterprise,*" Kirk added.

"I have heard of it," the alien said, relieved. "It is in the fleet of the United Federation of Planets?"

"Correct," Kirk said. "And so is that shuttlecraft in which you were flying."

"It was?"

"Don't you usually know whose property you're stealing?"

"I am not a thief!"

"You're certainly no ordinary thief," Kirk said, "considering what it is you appropriated."

"You are being very loose with your accusations and drawing conclusions without any facts."

"I know you made off with a ship that didn't belong to you."

"I do not 'make off' with things," the alien said, biting off the words. "My need gave me the right to its use—and note the word well, sir—the use of the ship."

Kirk shrugged. "You can try those technical evasions with Starfleet Command. You'll face your charges there."

"I am grateful that you rescued me," the alien said with sudden dignity.

"Don't mention it We're glad we caught you. Who are you?"

"My name is Lokai."

"Go on."

"I am from the planet Cheron."

"If I remember correctly," Spock said, "that is located in the southernmost part of the Galaxy, in a quarter that is still uncharted."

"What are you doing so far from your home?" Kirk asked. Lokai did not answer. "You know that upon completion of our mission, you will be returned to Star-base to face a very serious charge."

"The charge is trifling, I would have returned the ship as soon as I had—" Lokai stopped abruptly.

"Had what? What were you planning to do?"

"You monotoned humans are all alike," Lokai said in a sudden burst of fury. "First condemn and then attack!" Struggling to get a rein on his temper, he sank back. "I will answer no more questions."

"However we view him, Captain," Spock said, "he is certainly no ordinary specimen."

Lokai looked at the First Officer as though seeing him for the first time. "A Vulcan!"

"Don't think he'll be any easier on you," McCoy said. "He's half human."

"That's a strange combination."

Spock raised one eyebrow. "Fascinating that you should think so."

"You're not like any being we've ever encountered," Kirk added. "We'd like to know more about you and your planet."

"I—I'm very tired."

"I think that's an evasion. Surely you owe your rescuers some candor."

"I insist," Lokai said, deliberately closing his eyes. "I am extremely tired. Your vindictive cross-examination has exhausted me."

Kirk looked down at the self-righteous thief for a moment. Then Chekov's voice said from the intercom, "Contact with alien ship, Captain. They request permission to beam a passenger aboard. They say it's a police matter."

"Very well. I'll see him on the bridge. Let's go, Mr Spock."

Still another surprise awaited them there. The newcomer was almost a double for Lokai—except that he was black on his right side and white on his left.

"I am Bele," he said. His manner was assured and ingratiating.

Kirk eyed him warily. "Of the planet Cheron, no doubt. What brings you to us?"

"You bear precious cargo. Lokai. He has taken refuge aboard this ship. I am here to claim him."

"All personnel on this vessel are subject to my command. No one 'claims' anyone without due process."

"My apologies," Bele said readily. "I overstepped my powers. 'Claim' was undoubtedly an unfortunate word."

"What authorization do you have and from what source?"

"I am Chief Officer of the Commission on Political Traitors. Lokai was tried for and convicted of treason, but escaped. May I see him, please?"

"He's in sickbay. Understand that since you are now aboard the *Enterprise,* you are bound by its regulations."

Bele smiled, a little cryptically. "With your permission, Captain."

There were two guards at the door of Sickbay when Kirk, Spock and Bele arrived; McCoy was inside. Lokai glared up at them.

"Well, Lokai, it's a pleasure to see you again," Bele said. "This time I'm sure our 'joining' will be of a permanent nature. Captain, you are to be congratulated. Lokai has never before been rendered so—quiescent."

Lokai made a sound remarkably like a panther snarling, which brought in the two guards in a hurry. "I'm not going back to Cheron," he said with savage anger. "It's a world of murdering oppressors."

"I told you where you were going," Kirk said. "We brought your compatriot here simply as a courtesy. He wanted to identify you."

"And you see how this killer responds," Bele said. "As he repays all his benefactors…"

"Benefactors?" Lokai said. "You hypocrite. Tell him how you raided our homes, tore us from our families, herded us like cattle and sold us as slaves!"

"They were savages, Captain," Bele said. "We took them into our hearts and homes and educated them."

"Yes! Just enough education to serve the Master Race."

"You were the product of our love and you repaid us with murder."

"Why should a slave have mercy on the enslaver?"

"Slave? That was changed millennia ago. You were freed."

"Freed? Were we free to be men—free to be husbands and fathers—free to live our lives in dignity and equality?"

"Yes, you were free, if you knew how to use your freedom. You were free enough to slaughter and burn all that had been built."

Lokai turned to Kirk. "I tried to break the chains of a hundred million people. My only crime is that I failed. Of that I plead guilty."

"There is an order in things," Bele said. "He asked for Utopia in a day. It can't be done."

"Not in a day. And not in ten times ten thousand years by your thinking. To you we are a loathsome breed who will never be ready. I know you and all those with whom you are plotting to take power permanently. Genocide for my people is the Utopia you plan."

Bele, his eyes wide with fury, sprang at Lokai. The guards grabbed him. "You insane, filthy little plotter of ruin! You vicious subverter of every decent thought! You're coming back to stand trial for your crimes."

"When I return to Cheron, you will understand power. I will have armies of followers."

"You were brought here to identify this man," Kirk told Bele. "It is now clear, *gentlemen,* that you know each other very well. Bringing you together is the only service this ship has to offer. It is not a battlefield."

"Captain," Lokai said, "I led revolutionaries, not criminals. I demand political asylum. Your ship is a sanctuary."

"I'll say it just once more. For you this ship is a prison."

"Captain, it is imperative that you return him for judgment."

"Cheron is not a member of the Federation. No treaties have ever been signed. Your demand to be given possession of this prisoner is impossible to honor. There are no extradition procedures to accomplish it. Is that clear, Commissioner Bele?"

"Captain," Bele said, "I hope you will be sensible."

"I'm not interested in taking sides."

"Since my vessel has left the area—I was only a paid passenger —I urge you to take us to Cheron immediately."

Kirk felt himself beginning to bristle. "This ship has a mission to perform. Millions of lives are at stake. When that is completed, I'll return to Starbase 4. You will both be turned over to the authorities. You can each make your case to them."

"I'm sorry, Captain, but that is not acceptable. Not at all!"

"As a dignitary of a far planet," Kirk said, seething, "I offer you every hospitality of the ship while you are aboard. Choose any other course, and…"

"You're the Captain," Bele said with sudden mildness.

"And as for you, Lokai, I suggest you rest as much as possible. Especially your vocal chords. It seems you will have a double opportunity to practice your oratory at Starbase…"

He was interrupted by the buzz of the intercom. "Chekov to Captain Kirk. Urgent. Will you come to the bridge, sir?"

It was urgent, all right. The ship was off course; it seemed to have taken a new heading all by itself; it was moving away from Ariannus on a tack that would wind it up in the Coal Sack if it kept up. A check with all departments failed to turn up the nature of the malfunction.

"Mr Spock, give me the coordinates for Cheron."

"Roughly, sir, between 403 Mark 7 and Mark 9."

"Which is the way we're heading. Get Bele up here. I assigned him to the guest quarters on Deck 6."

Bele, once arrived, did not wait to be asked any questions. "Yes," he said, "we are on the way to Cheron. I should tell you that we are not only a very old race but a very long-lived one; and we have developed special powers which you could not hope to understand. Suffice it to say that this ship is now under my direction. For a thousand of your terrestrial years I have been pursuing Lokai through the Galaxy. I haven't come this far and this long to give him up now."

The elevator doors snapped open and Lokai ran out, followed by the two security guards.

"I will not return to Cheron!" he cried despairingly. "You guaranteed me sanctuary! Captain Kirk…"

"He cannnot help you," Bele said. "You have lost, Lokai. You are on your way to final punishment."

"Stop him!"

"Not this time, you evil mound of filth. Not this *time.*"

"My cause is just. You must help me—all of you…"

"The old cry. Pity me! Wherever he's gone, he has been helped to escape. On every planet he has found fools who bleed for him and shed tears for the oppressed one. But there is no escape from this ship. This is your last refuge."

With a cry of rage, Lokai leaped at him. Kirk pulled him off. "Security," he said, "take both of these men to the brig."

The guards stepped forward. In an instant, a visible wall of heat formed around both the aliens.

Bele laughed. "You are helpless, Captain."

"What a fool I am," Lokai said bitterly, "expecting help from such as you."

"This ship," Kirk said, "is going to Ariannus. The lives of millions of people make no other choice possible."

"You are being obtuse, Captain. I am permitting no choice. My will now controls this ship and nothing can break it." Every cord in Bele's body and every vein in his head stood out with the ferocity of his determination.

"Bele, I am Captain of this ship. It will follow whatever course I set for it—or I will order it destroyed."

Bele stared at him. "You're bluffing. You could no more destroy this ship than I could change colors."

Kirk turned sharply toward Uhura. "Lieutenant, tie bridge audio into master computer."

"Aye aye, sir."

Kirk sat down and hit a button on his chair. "Destruct Sequence. Computer, are you ready to copy?"

"Working," said the computer's voice.

"Stand by to verify Destruct Sequence Code One."

"Ready."

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship USS *Enterprise.* Destruct Sequence One—Code One One A."

There was a rapid run of lights over the face of the computer, accompanied by the usual beeping. Then on the upper left of the panel a yellow square lit up, with a black figure 1 in its center.

"Voice and Code One One A verified and correct. Sequence One complete."

Mr Spock, please continue."

"This is Commander Spock, Science Officer. Destruct Sequence Number Two—Code One One A Two B."

"Voice and code verified and correct. Sequence Two complete."

"Mr Scott."

The sweat was standing out on Scott's brow. Perhaps no one aboard loved the *Enterprise* as much as he did. Looking straight into Kirk's eyes, he said mechanically, "This is Lieutenant Commander Scott, Chief Engineering Officer. Destruct Sequence Number Three—Code One B Two B Three."

"Voice and code verified and correct. Destruct Sequence engaged. Awaiting final code for thirty-second countdown."

"Mr Spock, has this ship returned to the course set for it by my orders?"

"No, Captain. We are still headed for Cheron."

Bele said nothing. Kirk turned quietly back to the computer. "Begin thirty-second countdown. Code Zero-Zero-Destruct-Zero."

"Count beginning. Thirty. Twenty-nine."

"Now," Kirk said, "let us see you prevent the computer from fulfilling my commands."

"Twenty-five."

"You can use your will to drag this ship toward Cheron. But I control this computer. The final command is mine."

"Fifteen."

"From five to zero," Kirk said, "no command in the universe can stop the computer from completing its Destruct order."

"Seven."

"Waiting," Kirk said relentlessly.

"Five."

The lights stopped blinking and became a steady glare, and the beeping became a continuous whine. Chekov hunched tensely over his board. Sulu's hand was white on the helm, as though he might put the ship back on course through sheer muscle power. Uhura looked at Kirk for a moment, and then her eyes closed peacefully. Spock and Scott were tensely impassive.

"Awaiting code for irrevocable five seconds," the computer's voice said.

Kirk and Bele stared at each other. Then Kirk turned back to the computer for the last time.

"Wait!" Bele said. It was a cry of despair. "I agree! I agree!"

Kirk's expression did not change. He said, "Captain James Kirk. Code One Two Three Continuity. Abort Destruct order."

"Destruct order aborted." The computer went silent.

"Mr Spock, Are we heading for Ariannus?"

"No, sir. The *Enterprise* is now describing a circular course."

"And at Warp Seven, Captain," Scott added. "We are going nowhere mighty fast.'

"I warned you of his treachery," Lokai said. "You have weapons. Kill him!"

"We are waiting, Commissioner," Kirk said, "for you to honor your commitment."

"I have an alternative solution to offer, Captain. Simple, expedient, and, I am sure, agreeable. Captain—I am happy to have you complete your mission of mercy to Ariannus. It was madness to interfere with such a worthwhile endeavor."

Kirk listened stonily.

"Please, sir. You may proceed to Ariannus. Just guarantee me that, upon completion, you will take me and my traitorous captive to Cheron."

"Sir," Kirk said, "he is not your captive—and I make no deals about control of this ship."

Bele's shoulders sagged. He closed his eyes for a moment, his face curiously distorted, and then opened them again. "The ship's course is now in your control."

"Mr Sulu?"

"She responds, sir. I'm resetting course for Ariannus."

"And as for you two—let me reaffirm my position. I should put both of you in the brig for what you have done. As Lokai observed, we have weapons, from which no heat shield will protect you. But I won't do it, since you are new to this part of the Galaxy, which is governed by the laws of the United Federation of Planets. We live in peace with the fullest exercise of individual rights. The need to resort to force and violence has long since passed. It will not be tolerated on this ship."

"You are both free to move about the ship. An armed guard will accompany each of you. I hope you will take the opportunity to get to know the ways of the Federation through some of its best representatives, my crew. But make no mistake. Any interference with the *function* of this ship will be severely punished. That's all."

Bele, his face inscrutable, nodded and went out, followed by a guard.

Lokai said, "You speak very well, Captain Kirk. Your words promise justice for all."

"We try, sir."

"But I have learned to wait for actions. After Ariannus—what is your justice? I shall wait to see it dispensed."

He too went out followed by a guard. Spock looked after him.

"Fascinating," the First Officer said. "Two totally hostile humanoids."

"Disgusting is what I call them," Scott said.

"That is not a scientifically accurate description," Spock said.

"Fascinating isn't one, either. And disgusting describes exactly what I feel about those two."

"Your feelings, as usual, shed no light on the matter."

"Enough for one day," Kirk said. "Those two are beginning to affect you."

Lokai settled upon Uhura as his next hope, perhaps feeling that since he had made no headway with the white members of the crew, a black one might be more sympathetic. He was talking eagerly to her in the rec room, with Chekov and Spock as bystanders. Racially, the four made a colorful mixture, though probably none of them was aware of it.

"? and I know from my actions you must all think me a volcanic hothead—erupting lava from my nostrils at danger signals that are only figments of my imagination. But believe me, my friends, there can be no moment when I can have my guard down where such as Bele are present. And so what happens? I act the madman out of the anger and frustration he forces upon me and thereby prove his point that I *am* a madman."

"We all act incorrectly when we're angry," Uhura said.

"After all," Chekov added cheerfully, "we're only human."

"Ah, Mr Chekov, you have used the phrase which puts my impatience into perspective—which focuses on my lack of ability to convey to your captain, and to you, yes you here in this room, my lack of ability to alert you to the real threat of someone like Bele. There is no persecution on your planet. How can you understand my fear, my apprehension, my degradation, my suffering?"

"There was persecution on Earth once," Chekov said.

"Yes," said Uhura. "But to us, Chekov, that's only something we were taught in history class."

"Yes, that's right. It was long ago."

"Then," said Lokai, "how can I make your flesh know how it feels to see all those who are like you—and only because they are like you—despised, slaughtered and, even worse, denied the simplest bit of decency that is a living being's right. Do you know what it would be like to be dragged out of your hovel into a war on another planet? A battle that will serve your oppressor and bring death to you and your brothers?" There seemed to be no answer to that.

Bele, for reasons not to be guessed at, continued to work on Kirk—perhaps because he had developed a grudging respect for the man who had faced him down, or perhaps not. He visited the Captain's quarters whenever asked, though Kirk took care on each occasion to see that Spock was present as well.

"Putting the matter in the hands of your Starfleet Command is of course the proper procedure," Bele said on one such occasion.

"Will it be long before we hear from them, Captain?"

"I expect the reply is already on the way, Commissioner."

"But Command may not arrive at the solution you anticipate," Spock added. "There is the matter of the shuttlecraft Lokai appropriated."

"Gentlemen," Bele said, almost airily, "we are discussing a matter of degree. Surely, stealing a shuttlecraft cannot be equated with the murder of thousands of people?"

"We don't know that Lokai has done that," Spock said.

"Well, the one thing we're agreed on is that Lokai is a criminal."

"We are agreed," Kirk said, "that he took a shuttle-craft—excuse me. Kirk here."

"Captain," Uhura's voice said, "I have your communication from Starfleet Command."

"Fine, Lieutenant. Read it out."

"Starfleet Command extends greetings to Commissioner Bele of the planet Cheron. His urgent request to be transported to his planet with the man he claims prisoner has been taken under serious consideration. It is with great regret that we report we cannot honor that request. Intragalactic treaty clearly specifies that no being can be extradited without due process. In view of the circumstances we have no doubt that after a hearing at Starbase, Commissioner Bele will be provided transportation, but whether with or without his prisoner remains to be determined. End of message."

Bele's face was a study in the attempt to retain a bland mask over anger. "As always," he said, "Lokai has managed to gain allies, even when they don't recognize themselves as such. He will evade, delay and escape again, and in the process put innocent beings at each other's throats—for a cause they have no stake in, but which he will force them to espouse violently by twisting their minds with his lies, his loathsome accusations, his foul threats."

"I assure you, Commissioner," Kirk said, "our minds will not be twisted by Lokai—or by you."

"And you're a leader of men—a judge of character?" Bele said contemptuously. "It is obvious to the most simpleminded that Lokai is of an inferior breed…"

"The evidence of our eyes, Commissioner," Spock said, "is that he is of the same breed as yourself."

"Are you blind, Commander Spock?"

"Obviously not; but I see no significance in which side of either of you is white. Perhaps the experience of my own planet may help you to see why. Vulcan was almost destroyed by the same conditions and characteristics that threaten to destroy Cheron. We were a people like you—wildly emotional, often committed to irrationally opposing points of view, to the point of death and destruction. Only the discipline of logic saved our people from self-extinction."

"I am delighted Vulcan was saved, Commander, but expecting Lokai and his land to act with self-discipline is like expecting a planet to stop orbiting its sun."

"Maybe you're not a sun, and Lokai isn't a planet," Kirk said. "Give him a chance to state his grievances—listen to him—hear him out. Maybe he can change; maybe he *wants* to change."

"He cannot."

"Change is the essential process of all existence," Spock said. "For instance: The people of Cheron must have once been monocolored."

"Eh? You mean like both of you?"

"Yes, Commissioner," Kirk said. "There was a time—long ago, no doubt—when that must have been true."

Bele stared at them incredulously for a moment, and then burst into uproarious laughter.

While he was still recovering, the intercom sounded. "Scott here, Captain. We are orbiting Ariannus. We're ready with the decontamination procedure and Ariannus reports all ground precautions complete."

"Very good, Scotty, let her rip. Kirk out."

"I once heard," Bele said, still smiling, "that on some of your planets the people believe that they are descended from apes."

"Not quite," Spock said. "The apes are humanity's cousins, not their grandfathers. They evolved from common stock, in different directions. But in point of fact, all advanced forms of life have evolved from more primitive stages. Mutation produces changes, and the fittest of these survives. We have no reason to believe that we are at the end of the process—although no doubt the development of intelligence, which enables us to change our environment at will, has slowed down the action of selection."

"I am aware of the process," Bele said, somewhat ironically, "and I stand corrected on the detail. But I have told you that we are a very old race and a long-lived one. We have every reason to believe that we *are* the end of the process. The change is lost in

antiquity, but it seems sensible to assume that creatures like Lokai, of generally low intelligence and virtually no moral fiber, represent an earlier stage."

"Lokai has sufficient intelligence to have evaded you for a thousand years," Kirk said. "And from what I've seen of you, that can't have been easy to do."

"Nevertheless, regardless of occasional clever individuals, whom we all applaud, his people are as I have described them. To suggest that behind both of us is a monochrome ancestor…"

The buzzer sounded again. "Captain, Scott here again. We have completed the decontamination orbit. Orders?"

"Program for Starbase 4. We'll be right with you."

Bele was showing signs of his strained and intense look of concentration which Kirk had no reason to recall with confidence. Kirk said, in the tone of an order, "Join us on the bridge, Commissioner?"

"Nothing I would like better."

But when they arrived, the bridge personnel were in turmoil. They were clustered around the computer, at which Scott was stationed.

"What's wrong?" Spock asked.

"I don't rightly know, Mr Spock. I was trying to program for Starbase 4—as ordered—but I can't get a response."

Spock made a quick examination. "Captain, some of the memory banks are burned out."

"See if you can determine which ones."

"I will save you that trouble, Mr Spock," Bele said. "They are in Directional Control and in the Self-Destruct circuit. You caught me by surprise with that Destruct procedure before." As he spoke, the fire sheath began to form around him. "Now can we go on to Cheron without any more discussion?"

"Stand clear of him," Kirk said. "Guard, shoot to stun."

The heat promptly increased. "I cannot block your weapon," Bele said, "but my heat shield will go out of control if I am rendered unconscious. This will destroy not only everyone here, but much of the ship's bridge itself."

The Cheronian was certainly a virtuoso at producing impasses. As he and Kirk glared at each other, the elevator doors parted and Lokai came storming out to the Captain.

"So this is the justice you promised after Ariannus! You have signed my death warrant! What do you do—carry justice on your tongues? Or will you fight and die for it?"

"After so many years of leading the fight," Kirk observed, "you seem very much alive."

"I doubt that the same can be said for many of his followers," Spock said.

Bele laughed contemptuously. At once, a fiery sheath grew also around Lokai.

"You're finished, Lokai. We've got your kind penned in their districts in Cheron. And they'll stay that way. You've combed the Galaxy and come up with nothing but monocolored primitives who snivel that they've outgrown fighting."

"I have given up on these useless pieces of bland flesh," Lokai raged. "But as for you, you—you half of a tyrant…"

"You image in a cheap mirror…"

They rushed together. Their heat shields fused into a single, almost solid mass as they struggled. Its edges drove the crew back, and wavered perilously near to the control boards.

"Bele!" Kirk shouted. "Keep this up and you'll never get to Cheron, you'll have wrecked the bridge! This will be your last battlefield—your thousand years of pursuit wasted!"

The combatants froze. Then Bele threw Lokai away from him, hard. Lokai promptly started back.

"And Lokai, you'll die here in space," Kirk continued. "You'll inspire no more disciples. Your cause will be lost."

Lokai stopped. Then his heat shield went down, and so, a moment later, did Bele's.

"Captain," Spock said, "I believe I have found something which may influence the decision. I can myself compute with moderate rapidity when deprived of the machine…"

"Yes, and beat the machine at chess, too. Go on."

"Because of our first involuntary venture in the direction of Cheron, our orbit around Ariannus was not the one originally planned. I believe we can leave it for Starbase 4 in a curve which will pass us within scanning range of Cheron. With extreme magnification, we might get a visual readout. I can feed Mr Sulu the coordinates; he will have to do the rest of the piloting by inspection, as it were, but after the piloting he did for us behind the Klingon lines* I am convinced he could fly his way out of the Cretan labyrinth if the need arose." *See *Spock Must Die!*

"I believe that too," Kirk said. "But what I don't see is what good you think will come out of the maneuver."

"Observing these strangers and their irreconcilable hatreds," Spock said, "has given me material to draw certain logical conclusions. At present it is only a hypothesis, but I think there would be value in testing it."

Anything Spock said was a possibly valid hypothesis was very likely to turn out to be what another man would have called a law of nature. Kirk said, "It is so ordered."

The visual readout of Cheron was wobbly, but growing clearer; Sulu had sufficiently improved upon Spock's rather indefinite course corrections so that the moment of closest approach would be not much over 15,000 miles. It was an Earthlike planet, but somewhat larger, by perhaps a thousand miles of diameter. Both Bele and Lokai were visibly moved by the sight. Well, a thousand years is a long time, Kirk thought, even for a long-lived race.

"There is your home, gentlemen," he said. "Not many details yet, but if you represent the opposing factions there typically, we must be picking up a raging battle."

"No, sir," Spock said from his console. The words could not have been simpler, but there was something in his tone—could it possibly have been sadness?—that riveted Kirk's attention, and that of the Cheronians as well. "No conflicts at all."

"What are you picking up?" Kirk said.

"Several very large cities. All uninhabited. Extensive traffic systems barren of traffic. Vegetation and lower animals encroaching on the cities. No sapient life forms registering at all, Captain."

"You mean the people are *all* dead?"

"Yes, Captain—all dead. This was what I had deduced when I suggested this course. They have annihilated each other—totally."

"My people," Bele said. "All dead."

"Yes, Commissioner," Spock said. "All of them."

"And—mine?" Lokai said.

"No one is left. No one."

The two survivors faced each other with ready rage.

"Your bands of murderers…"

"Your genocidal maniacs…"

"Gentlemen!" Kirk said in his command voice. Then, more softly, "The cause you fought for no longer exists. Give up your hate, and we welcome you to live with us."

Neither seemed to hear him; the exchange of glares went on.

"You have lost, Bele. I have won."

"You always think you win when you destroy."

"What's the matter with you two?" Kirk demanded, his own temper at last beginning to fray. "Didn't you hear my First Officer? Your planet is dead. Nobody is alive on Cheron just because of this land of hate! Give it up, in heaven's name!"

"You have lost the planet," Lokai said. "I have won. I have won because I am free."

Suddenly, he made a tremendous leap for the elevator. The doors opened for him, and then, with a wild laugh, he was gone. Bele made as if to rush after him; Kirk stopped him.

"Bele—listen! The chase is finished."

"No, no! He must not escape me!"

"Where can he go?" Spock said.

"I think I know the answer to that," Uhura said. "Someone has just activated the Transporter."

"Oh," Kirk said. "Are we in Transporter range of Cheron?"

"Just coming into it," Spock said. "And a sentient life form is beginning to come through on the planet."

"It is he!" Bele cried. "Now I'll get him!"

He sprang for the elevator in turn. The guards, now belatedly alert, moved to stop him, but Kirk held up his hands.

"Let him go. Bele, there's no one there to punish him. His judges are dead."

"I," Bele said, "am his punisher." Then he too was gone.

There was a brief silence. Then Uhura said, "Captain, the Transporter has been activated again."

"Of course," Kirk said wearily. He felt utterly washed out. "Is he showing up on Cheron on the scanners now, Mr Spock?"

"Some second sapient life form is registering. I see no other possible conclusion."

"But," Uhura said, "it doesn't make any sense."

"To expect sense from two mentalities of such extreme viewpoints is not logical," Spock said. "They are playing out the drama of which they have become the captives, just as their compatriots did."

“But their people are dead,” Sulu said slowly. “How can it matter to them now which one is right?”

“It does to them,” said Spock. “And at the same time, in a sense it does not. A thousand years of hating and running have become all of life.”

“Spock,” said McCoy’s voice behind them, “may I remind you that I’m supposed to be the psychologist aboard this ship?”

“Spock’s human half,” Kirk said, turning, “is perhaps better equipped to perceive half measures taking over the whole man than the rest of us, Bones. And his Vulcan side quite accurately predicted the outcome. Hate wasn’t all Lokai and Bele had at first, but by allowing it to run them, that’s all they ended up with. This is their last battlefield—and let us hope that we never see its like again. Mr Sulu, Warp Two for Starbase 4.”

WHOM GODS DESTROY

(Lee Erwin and Jerry Sohl)

Dr Donald Cory seemed almost effusively glad to see Captain Kirk and Spock, not very much to Kirk's surprise. There was ordinary reason enough: Kirk and Governor Cory were old friends, and in addition, Kirk's official reason for the visit was to ferry him a revolutionary new drug which might release him from his bondage. And what bondage! It would take the most dedicated of men to confine himself behind a force field, beneath the poisonous atmosphere of Elba II, in order to tend the fourteen remaining incurably insane patients in the Galaxy.

"Fifteen, now," Cory said. He was a cheerful-looking man despite his duties, round-faced and white-haired. "You'll remember him, Jim: Garth of Izar."

"Of course I remember him," Kirk said, shocked. "He was one of the most brilliant cadets ever to attend the Academy. The last I heard, he was a Starship Fleet Captain—and there were no bets against his becoming an admiral, either. What happened?"

"Something utterly bizarre. He was horribly maimed in an accident off Antos IV. The people there are master surgeons, as you've probably heard. They virtually rebuilt and restored him—and in gratitude, he offered to lead them in an attempt to conquer the Galaxy. They refused, and he then tried to destroy the entire planet with all its inhabitants. One of his officers queried the order with Starfleet Command and, naturally, he wound up here."

"How is he responding?" Spock asked.

"Nobody here responds to anything we try," Cory said. "That in fact is the ultimate reason why they're here at all. Perhaps your new drug will help, but frankly, I'm pessimistic; I can't afford not to be."

That's understandable," Kirk said. "I'd like to see Garth, Donald. Is that possible?"

"Of course. The security section is this way."

The security cells offered evidence, were any needed, that rare though insanity now was, it was no respecter of races. Most of the inmates behind the individual force fields were humanoid, but among them was a blue Andorian and a pig-faced Tellarite. Perhaps the most pathetic was a young girl, scantily dressed and quite beautiful; her greenish skin suggested that someone of Vulcan-Romulan stock had been among her ancestors, though probably a long time back, for she showed none of the otter physical characteristics of those peoples.

As the group passed her, she called out urgently, "Captain! Starship Captain! You're making a mistake! Please—get me out of here and let me tell you what has happened!"

"Poor child," Cory said. "Paranoia with delusions of reference—closer to a classic pattern than anybody else we have here, but all the same we can't break through it. Captain Kirk is pressed for time at the moment, Marta.

The girl ignored him. "There's nothing wrong with me. Can't you see just by looking at me? Can't you tell just by listening to me? Why won't you let me explain?"

"A rational enough question, that last," Spock observed.

"I *am* rational!"

Kirk stopped and turned toward her. "What is it you want to say to me?"

The girl shrank away from the invisible barrier and pointed. "I can't tell you, not in front of him."

"You're afraid to talk because of Governor Cory?"

Her expression became sly, her tone confidential. "He isn't *really* Governor Cory at all, you know."

Kirk looked at Cory, who spread his hands helplessly. "I don't mean to sound callous," he said, "but I hear it every day. Everyone is plotting against her, and naturally I'm the chief villain. Garth's cell is around the corner. He's been unusually disturbed and we've had to impose additional restraints."

He waved them forward. As Kirk turned the corner, he was stunned to discover what Cory had meant by "restraints." The man in the cell was shackled spread-eagled against the wall, his chin sunk upon his chest, a vision straight out of a medieval torture chamber. With a muffled exclamation, Kirk stepped forward. Surely no modern rehabilitation program could necessitate…

At the sound, the prisoner looked up. He was disheveled, haggard and wild-eyed, but there could be no doubt about his identity.

He was Governor Cory.

Kirk spun. The other Cory was not there. Standing at the bend of the corridor was a tall, hawk-nosed man with deep-set, glowing eyes, with a phaser trained on the two *Enterprise* officers. Behind him crowded most of the supposedly restrained inmates Kirk had previously seen, also armed.

"Garth!"

"No other," the tall man said pleasantly. "You said you wanted to see me, Captain. Well, here I am. But I suggest you step into the cell first. The screen's down—that's why we had the Governor shackled. Tlollu, put the Vulcan in the biggest empty cell. Captain, drop your weapons on the floor and join your old friend."

Kirk had no choice. As he entered, a faint hum behind him told him that the force field had gone up. He crossed quickly to Cory and tried to release him, but the shackles turned out to be servo-driven; the control was obviously outside somewhere. Cory said hoarsely, "Sorry he tricked you, Jim."

"Don't worry, well think of something."

"Our esteemed Governor," Garth's voice said, "reacts to pain quite stoically, doesn't he?"

Kirk turned. The green-skinned girl was also free, and clinging to Garth, who was fondling her absently.

"Garth, you've got me. What's the point in making Cory suffer like this…"

"You will address me by my proper title, Kirk!"

"Sorry. I should have said Captain Garth."

"Starship Fleet Captain is merely one of my minor titles," Garth said with haughty impatience. "I am Lord Garth of Izar—and future Emperor of the Galaxy."

Oho, this was going to be very tricky; Garth had described his own madness all too accurately. "My apologies, Lord Garth."

"We forgive you. Of course, you think I'm a madman, don't you, and are humoring me. But if so, why am I out here while you two are in there?" Garth roared with laughter at his own joke. Kirk, finding the girl, Marta, watching him intently, forced a smile. She whispered in Garth's ear. "Later, perhaps. Marta seems quite taken with you, Captain. Fortunately for you, I have no weaknesses, not even jealousy."

"I tried to warn you, Captain," Marta said. "Remember?"

"She did, you know," Garth said affably. "But of course I had so arranged matters that you would not listen. Our Marta is indeed a

little unstable."

"What," Kirk said, "do you expect to accomplish with a staff of fourteen mad creatures?"

"Now you try reason. That is better. The Izarians, Captain, are inherently a master race. Much more so than the Romulans and the Klingons, as their failures have shown. When I return triumphantly from exile, my people will rally to my cause."

"Then you have nothing to fear from Governor Cory. Why don't you release him?"

"I fear no one; the point is well taken. You see, we can also be magnanimous." He touched a device at his belt. Behind Kirk, Cory's shackles sprang open with a clang; Kirk only just managed to catch the tortured Governor before he fell to the floor.

"Thank you, Lord Garth," Kirk said. "What have you done with the medicine I brought?"

"That poison? I destroyed it, of course. Enough of this chatter; it is time I took command of the ship you brought me. You will help me, of course."

"Why should I?"

"Because I need the ship," Garth said, with surprised patience. "My crew mutinied. So did my Fleet Captains. The first use I will make of the *Enterprise* is to hunt them down and punish them for that."

"My crew won't obey any such lunatic orders," Kirk said, abandoning with disgust any attempt to be reasonable with the poor, dangerous creature. "You're stuck, Garth. Give it up."

"Your crew will obey you, Captain. And you forget how easily I convinced *you* that I was your old friend Governor Donald Cory. It's a helpful technique, as you will observe. Watch."

Garth's features, even his very skin, seemed to crawl. When the horrifying metamorphosis was over—and it took only a few seconds—the man inside the false Cory's clothes was no longer Garth, but a mirror-Kirk.

The duplicate grinned, gave a mock salute, and strode off. Marta remained for a moment, giving Kirk a look of peculiar intensity. Then she too left, murmuring something under her breath.

"I—was praying you wouldn't get here at all," Cory said. "A starship is all he needs—and now he's got one."

"Not quite. And even if he does gain command of the *Enterprise,* one of my officers is bound to appeal his first crazy order to Starfleet Command, just as his own officers did."

"Jim, are you sure of that?"

Kirk realized that he was not at all sure of it. In the past, acting under sealed orders had forced him to give what seemed to be irrational orders often enough so that, tit for tat, his crew assumed any irrationality on his part was bound to be explained eventually. He had, in fact, long been afraid that that would be the outcome.

"No—I'm far from sure. But one starship is not a fleet; even if my officers obey him implicitly, there's a limit to the harm he can do."

"Those limits are pretty wide," Cory said. "He says he has devised a simple, compact method for making even stable suns go nova. I think it quite likely that he has. Can you imagine what a blackmail weapon that would be? And if the Izarians do rally to him—which wouldn't surprise me either, they've always been rather edgy and recalcitrant members of the Federation—then he has his fleet, too. It won't do to underestimate him, Jim."

"I don't. He was a genius, that I remember very well What a waste!"

Cory did not answer.

"How does he manage that shape-changing trick?"

"The people of Antos taught him the technique of cellular metamorphosis and rearrangement, so he could help them restore the destroyed parts of his body. It's not uncommon in nature; on Earth, even lowly animals like crabs and starfish have it. But Garth is a long way from being a lower animal. He can mimic any form he wishes to now. He used it to kill off my entire medical staff—and to trap me. And laughed. I can still hear that laugh. And to think I hoped to rehabilitate him!"

"There's still a chance. Even masquerading as me, Garth can't get aboard the *Enterprise* without a password—we made that standard procedure after some nasty encounters with hypnosis and other forms of deception."

"Where does that leave us, Jim? He's got us."

"Why," Kirk said slowly, "he will have to ask us for help. And when that time comes, he'll get it—and it will be, with any luck at all, not the help he thinks he wants, but the help he needs."

"If you can do that," Cory said, "you're a better doctor than I am."

"I'm not a doctor at all," Kirk said. "But if I can get him into McCoy's hands…"

"McCoy? If you mean Leonard McCoy, he's probably Chief Medical Director of Starfleet Command by now. Hopeless."

"No, Donald. Garth is not an admiral, and McCoy is not warming any bench on Earth, either. He's in orbit right above our heads. He's the Medical Officer of the *Enterprise.*"

Cory was properly staggered, but he recovered quickly. "Then," he said, "all we have to do is get Garth onto the *Enterprise*—which is exactly what he wants. I can't say that you fill me with optimism, Jim."

Garth appeared outside the cell the next day, all smiles and solicitude. "I hope you haven't been too uncomfortable, Captain?"

"I've been in worse places."

"Still, I'm afraid I've been somewhat remiss in my duties as your host. In my *persona* as Cory, I invited you down to my planet for dinner—you and Mr Spock. The invitation still stands."

"Where is Mr Spock?"

In answer, Garth beckoned, and Spock was brought around the corner, surrounded by an armed guard of madmen. Among them was Marta, smiling, a phaser leveled at Spock's head.

"Nice to see you, Mr Spock."

"Thank you, Captain."

Kirk turned back to Garth. "Isn't Governor Cory dining with us?"

"Governor Cory is undergoing an involuntary fast, necessitated by his resisting me. You will find, however, that for those who cooperate we set a handsome table."

Kirk was about to refuse when Cory said, "You can't help me by going hungry, Jim. Go along with them."

"Good advice, Governor," Garth said, beaming. "Well, Captain?"

"You're very persuasive."

Garth laughed and led the way.

The staff refectory of the Elba II station had evidently been once as drably utilitarian as such places always tend to be, but now it looked like the scene of a Roman banquet. Garth waved Kirk and Spock to places between himself and Marta. They sat down wordlessly, aware of the vigilant presence at their backs of the Tellarite and the Andorian. Kirk became aware, as well, that Marta was virtually fawning on him.

Garth glared at her. "Hands off, slut."

This only seemed to please the girl. "You're jealous, after all!" she said.

"Nonsense. I'm above that sort of thing. The Captain is annoyed by your attentions. That's all."

The girl looked sweetly at Kirk. "Am I annoying you, darling?"

This looked like a good opportunity to provoke a little dissension in the ranks of the mad. "Not really," Kirk said.

"You see? He's fascinated by me and it bothers you. Admit it."

"He said nothing of the sort," Garth retorted. "Your antics will lead to nothing but your being beaten to death."

"No, they won't. You wouldn't. I'm the most beautiful woman on this planet."

"Necessarily, since you're the only one," Garth said.

The girl preened herself. "I'm the most beautiful woman in the Galaxy. And I'm intelligent, too, and I write poetry and I paint marvelous pictures and I'm a wonderful dancer."

"Lies, all lies! Let me hear one poem you've written."

"If you like," Marta said calmly. She got up and moved to the front of the table, striking an absurdly theatrical pose. At the same time, Spock leaned slightly closer to Kirk.

"Captain," he said almost inaudibly, through motionless lips, "if you could create a diversion, I might find my way to the control room to release the force field."

Kirk nodded. The notion was a good one; all they would need would be a few seconds if Scotty had a security detail alerted—as he probably did have if Garth had already tried to pass himself off as Kirk without the password.

Garth was glaring at Marta, who, however, was looking only at Kirk. She began: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate. Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, And summer's lease hath all too…

"*You* wrote that?" Garth broke in, shouting.

"Yesterday, as a matter of fact."

"More lies. It was written by an Earthman named Shakespeare a long time ago."

"Which doesn't change the fact that I wrote it again yesterday. I think it's one of my best poems, don't you?"

Garth controlled his temper with an obvious effort. "Sit down, Marta, you waste everyone's time. Captain, if you really want her, you can have her."

"Most magnanimous," Kirk said drily.

"You will find that I *am* magnanimous to my friends—and merciless to my enemies. I want you, both of you, to be my friends."

"Upon what, precisely," Spock said, "will our friendship be based?"

"Upon the firmest of foundations—enlightened self-interest. You, Captain, are second only to me as the finest military commander in the Galaxy."

"That's flattering, but at present I'm primarily an explorer."

"As I have been too. I have charted more new worlds than any man in history."

"Neither of these records can help a man who has lost his judgment," Spock said coldly. "How could you, a Starship Fleet Captain, have believed that a Federation squadron would blindly obey an order to destroy the entire Antos race? That people is as famous for its benevolence as for its skill—as your own survival proves."

"That was my only miscalculation," Garth said. "I had risen above this decadent weakness, but my officers had not. My new officers, the men in this room, will obey me without question. As for you, you both have eyes but cannot see. The Galaxy surrounds us—limitless vistas—and yet the Federation would have us grub away like ants in a somewhat larger than usual anthill. But I am not an insect. I am a master, and will claim my realm."

"I agree," Kirk said, "that war is not always avoidable and that you were a great warrior. I studied your victory at Axanar when I was a cadet. It's required reading at the Academy to this day."

"Which is as it should be."

"Quite so. But my first visit to Axanar was as a newfledged lieutenant with the peace mission."

"Politicians and weaklings," Garth said. "They threw away my victory."

"No, they capped it with another. They were statesmen and humanitarians, and they had a dream—a dream that has become a reality and has spread throughout the stars. A dream that has made Mr Spock and me brothers."

Garth smiled tightly and turned to Spock. "Do you feel that Captain Kirk is your brother?"

"Captain Kirk," Spock said, "speaks figuratively. But with due allowance for this, what he says is logical and I do, in fact, agree with it."

"Blind—truly blind. Captain Kirk is your commanding officer and you are his subordinate; the rest is sugar-coating. But you are a worthy commander in your own right, and in my fleet you will assuredly have a starship to command."

"Forgive me," Spock said, "but exactly where *is* your fleet?"

Garth made a sweeping gesture. "Out there—waiting for me; they will flock to my cause with good reason. Limitless wealth, limitless power, solar systems ruled by the elite. We, gentlemen, are that elite. We must take what is rightfully ours from the stultifying clutches of decadence."

Spock was studying Garth with the expression of a bacteriologist confronted by a germ he had thought long extinct. "You must be aware," he said, "that you are attempting to repeat the disaster that resulted in your becoming an inmate of this place."

"I was betrayed—and then treated barbarically."

"On the contrary, you were treated justly and with a compassion you displayed toward none of your intended victims. Logically, therefore, it would…"

Garth bounded to his feet with a strangled cry, pointing a trembling forefinger at Spock. All other sound in the hall stopped at once.

"Remove this—this walking computer!"

Spock was removed, none too gently. Kirk's abortive move to intervene was blocked by me smiling Marta, who had produced her phaser seemingly from nowhere.

Garth took the weapon from her, and instantly switched back to his parody of the affable host. "Won't you try some of this wine, Captain?"

"Thank you, but I prefer to join Mr Spock."

"And I prefer that you remain here. We have many divertisements more diverting than Marta's poetry, I assure you. By the way, I assume you play chess?"

"Quite a lot. We have a running tournament aboard the *Enterprise.*"

"Not unusual. How would you respond to Queen to Queen's Level Three?"

So—Garth had tried to fool Scotty and had been stopped by the code challenge; now he was fishing for the countersign. "There are, as you know, thousands of possible responses, especially if the move is not an opening one."

"I'm interested in only one."

"I can't for the life of me imagine which."

" 'For the life of me' is a well-chosen phrase," Garth said, smiling silkily. "It could literally come to that, Captain."

I doubt it. Dead I'm of no use to you at all."

"I could make you beg for death."

Kirk laughed. "Torture? You were Academy-trained, Garth. Suppose *I* attempted to break *your* conditioning by such means; would it work?"

"No," Garth admitted. "But observe, Captain, that Governor Cory is not Academy-trained, and furthermore has been weakened by his recent, ah, reverses. And among his medical equipment is a curious chair which was used in the rehabilitation process. As such it was quite painless, and, I might add, also useless. It made men docile, and hence of no use to me. I have added certain refinements to it which make it no longer painless—yet the pain can be prolonged indefinitely because there is no actual destruction of tissue."

"In the midnights of November," Marta said suddenly, "when the dead man's fair is nigh, and danger in the valley, and anger in the sky—I wrote that this morning."

"Very appropriate," Kirk said grimly.

"Tell him what he wants. Then we'll go away together."

Kirk's lips thinned. It was the old double device of the carrot and the stick, and in a very crude form, at that. But it wouldn't do to reject the carrot out of hand; the girl was obviously too unstable for that.

"Torturing Governor Cory," he said, "would be quite useless. I would simply force you to kill me; if you didn't, I would intervene."

"Phasers can be set to stun."

"If I am unconscious, I can't be blackmailed by Governor Cory's pain, can I?"

Garth glared at him for a long moment with unwinking eyes. Then a spasm of pure rage twisted his face. Raising the phaser, he leveled it at Kirk and fired point-blank.

Kirk awoke to a sound of liquid gurgling quietly. Then it stopped, and Kirk felt a cup of some sort being pressed to his lips. He swallowed automatically. Wine. Pretty good, too.

"Slowly," said a woman's voice. "Slowly, my darling."

That was Marta. He opened his eyes. He was lying on a divan with the girl sitting beside him, a goblet in her hands; there was a carafe on a small table nearby.

"Rest," she said. "You're in my room." She took his hand and kissed it gently, then stroked his face.

Kirk studied her. "So he's decided to give the carrot another try?"

"I don't understand you," she said. "I was terrified that he would put you in the Chair. I told him I would discover your secret. I lied. I would have told him anything to save you from the torment."

After a moment Kirk said, "I think you mean that."

"I do." She leaned forward and embraced him, sighing and clinging. "This is where I've longed to be. I think I knew I loved you the first moment I saw you."

Kirk disengaged himself gently. "I want to help you, Marta. If I can get back to the *Enterprise,* I'll be able to."

"It's not possible."

"There's a way," Kirk said. "If I can get to the control room and cut off the force field, Garth is finished."

"Garth is my leader."

"And he'll lead you to your destruction. He has already destroyed the medicine that might have helped you. But I think my Ship's Surgeon has a sample he might be able to duplicate."

"I will help you in a little while," Marta said thoughtfully. "Your friend Spock will soon be here, and then we will see. I've arranged that much, at any rate."

Was there no predicting this girl?"How did you do it?"

"A convincing lie," she said, shrugging, "told to a guard who finds me desirable."

"Marta, let me help you, too. If I can get away from Garth, back aboard…"

She silenced him with a kiss, which he did not fight. When they separated, she was breathing hard and her eyes were glittering.

"There is a way," she said. "A way in which we can be together always. Where Garth cannot harm us. Trust me and believe in me, darling."

She kissed him again, clutching at him with almost animal intensity. At the same time, he became aware that her left hand was burrowing between the cushions of the divan. He pulled away, to discover a long, thin, wicked-looking knife which she had been about to drive into his back.

He shoved her away, hard. Almost at the same instant, Spock stepped into sight and seized her upper arms from behind.

She looked back over her shoulder. "You mustn't stop me," she said reasonably, reproachfully. "He is my love and so I must kill him. It is the only way to save him from Lord Garth."

Spock pinched her neck. The knife clattered to the floor as she slumped.

"Apparently," Spock said expressionlessly, "she has worked out an infallible method for ensuring male fidelity. An interesting aberration."

"I'm glad to see you, Mr Spock."

"Thank you, Captain. I am now armed, and I assume we will try to reach the control room. Would you like the weapon?"

"No, I'm still a little shaky; you handle it. The room will be guarded."

"Then we will blast our way in."

That was surprisingly ferocious of Spock; perhaps the attempted murder of his Captain had shaken him momentarily?"Only if it's absolutely necessary, Mr Spock. Meanwhile, set your phaser on 'stun.' "

"I have already done so, Captain."

They stepped cautiously out of the room, then were forced to duck back in again as footsteps approached. Once the inmates had passed, they stole out into the corridor.

The guard before the control room was the Tellarite. He seemed to be in some sort of trance; Spock stunned him as easily as shooting a sitting duck. Kirk scooped up the fallen man's phaser, and they stuffed the limp body into a nearby closet.

Kirk cautiously tried the door. "Unlocked," he whispered. "I'll kick it open; you go in ready to shoot."

"Yes, Captain."

They burst in; but the place was deserted. Spock strode to the master switch and threw it. "Force field now off, Captain."

Kirk stationed himself at the console and activated the communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Kirk to *Enterprise.*"

"Here, Captain," Uhura's voice said. "Mr Scott, it's Captain Kirk!"

The view screen lit to show Scotty's face. "Scott here, Captain. You had us worried."

Have Dr McCoy synthesize a new supply of drug as fast as possible."

"Aye aye, sir."

"And I want a fully armed security detail here, Scotty, on the double."

"They're already in the Transporter Room."

"It would be better," Spock said, "if you were to return to the *Enterprise* at once."

"Why?" Kirk asked in astonishment.

"Your safety is vital to the ship. I can take charge of the security detail."

"I see," Kirk said. "Very well, Mr Spock. Mr Scott, beam me aboard on receipt of countersign."

"Aye, sir," the engineer said. "Queen to Queen's Level Three."

"Mr Spock will give the countersign." Kirk leveled his phaser. "Go ahead, Spock—if that's who you are. Give him the countersign. You're supposed to know it."

"Security guard ready," Scott's voice said. "Mr Sulu, lock into beamdown coordinates. Ensign Wyatt, ready to energize."

Spock reached for the master switch, his lineaments already changing into the less familiar ones of Garth. Kirk pulled his trigger. Nothing happened. The switch clicked home; the force field was reactivated.

"Blast away, Captain," Garth said. "I would not be fool enough to let you capture a charged phaser."

"Where is Spock? What have you done to him?"

"He is in his cell. And I have done nothing to him yet. But anything that does happen henceforth will be on your conscience—unless you give me the countersign."

"Captain Garth…"

"Lord Garth."

"No, sir. Captain—Starship Fleet Captain—is an honored title, and it was once yours."

"Quite true," Garth said, but this own phaser did not waver. "And I was the greatest of them all, wasn't I?"

"You were. But now you're a sick man."

Garth bristled. "I've never been more healthy."

"Think," Kirk said. "Think back. Try to remember what you were like before the accident that sent you to Antos IV."

"I—I can't remember," Garth said. "It's—almost as if I died and was reborn."

"But I remember you. You were always the finest of the Fleet Captains. You were the prototype, and a model for the rest of us."

"Yesss—I do remember that. It was a great responsibility—but one I was proud to bear."

"And you bore it well. Captain Garth, the disease that changed you is not your fault. Nor are you truly responsible for the things you've done since then—no matter how terrible they may seem to you, or to us."

"I don't want to hear any more of this," Garth said, but his voice was less decisive than his words. "You—you're weak, and you're trying to drain me of my strength."

"No! I want you to regain what you once had. I want you to go back to the greatness you lost."

For a moment Kirk thought he had been winning, but this was all too evidently the wrong tack. Garth stiffened, and the wavering phaser came back into line.

"I have never lost greatness! It was taken from me! But I shall be greater still. I am Lord Garth, Master of the Galaxy."

"Listen to me, dammit…"

"The others failed, but I will not. Alexander, Lee Kuan, Napoleon, Hitler, Krotus—all of them are dust, but I will triumph."

"Triumph or fail," Kirk said levelly, "you too will be dust."

"Not yet. Back to your cell, ex-Captain Kirk. Soon your doubts will be laid to rest. Out!"

The Tellarite and the Andorian came back for him the next day and hauled him out into the corridor, leaving Governor Cory behind. They brought him back to the refectory, where all the rest of Garth's followers—except Marta, who was not to be seen—were working to transform the hall from a banquet scene into some sort of ceremonial chamber. Garth was there, seemingly childishly happy, dividing his attention between Kirk and his minions.

"The throne must be higher—higher than anything else. Use that table as a pedestal. Welcome back, Captain. You will be needed for our coronation."

"Coronation?" Kirk said, a little dazed.

"I know that even a real throne is merely a chair, but the symbolism is important, don't you agree? And the crown will be only a token in itself; but it will serve as a standard around which our followers will rally."

"You have only a handful of men."

Garth smiled. "Others have begun with less, but none will have reached so far as we. Good, very good. Now we will want a royal carpet for our feet. That cloth will do nicely. The tread of our feet will sanctify it."

"And it will still be a tablecloth, stained by food and wine," Kirk said. "That's all."

"My dear Captain, you do refuse to enter into the spirit of the thing, don't you? Would you prefer a larger role in the ceremony? You could serve as a human sacrifice, for example."

"I'm sure I wouldn't enjoy the rest of it. And you seem to need me alive."

"That's true. All right. How about Crown Prince?"

"I'm not part of the family. Who were they again? Krotus, Alexander, Hitler, Genghis Khan and so forth?"

"Genghis Khan," Garth said reflectively. "I'd forgotten about him. Heir apparent, I believe, that's the proper role for you. Now we think we are ready. Excuse us for the moment, Captain."

Garth bowed grandly and went out. The guards remained alert; the Tellarite, who had been stunned in Garth's earlier attempt to trick the countersign out of Kirk, was regarding the Captain with especial vigilance—and no little animosity. Evidently he had forgotten, if he had ever known, that the whole charade had been arranged by Garth himself.

Suddenly the air shook with a blast of recorded music. Kirk did not have to be an expert to recognize it: it was, ironically, *Ich bete an die Macht der Liebe,* by somebody named Bortniansky, to which all Academy classes marched to their graduation.

The refectory doors were drawn aside, and Garth, not very resplendent in a cast-off uniform, entered solemnly, chin up, eyes hooded. Beneath his right arm was tucked a crown which looked as if it had been hastily cut from a piece of sheet metal. On his right arm was Marta, swathed in trailing bedsheets and looking decidedly subdued.

The other madmen dropped to their knees, and the cold nose of a phaser against the back of his neck reminded Kirk not to remain standing alone. It came just in time—he had been almost about to laugh.

Stepping slowly in time to the processional, the "royal" couple proceeded along the "carpet" to the "throne," which they mounted. Garth turned and signaled his followers to rise. The music stopped.

"Since there is no one here, or elsewhere in the known universe, mighty enough to perform such a ceremony," he said grandly, "we will perform it ourselves. Therefore, we hereby proclaim that we are Lord Garth, formerly of Izar, now Master-that-is-to-come of the Galaxy."

He settled the metal crown upon his own head. "And now, we designate our beloved Marta to be our consort."

Garth kissed her chastely on the forehead. She shrank away from him, but stood her ground. Carefully, he fastened around her throat what appeared to be a necklace with a diamond pendant; conceivably it held the diamond from Garth's own Fleet Captain clasp, but somehow Kirk doubted that.

Garth seated himself upon the throne. "And now, guards, remove our beloved consort and our heir apparent, so that they may conclude their vital roles in this ritual."

They took Marta out first. As she was surrounded, she she began to keen—an eerie, wailing dirge that chilled Kirk's blood. They had her hands pinned behind her back.

Then the Tellarite and the Andorian were prodding him out of the refectory, through a different door. He saw at once where he was being driven: back to the control room. Behind him, the music crashed out again, and the guards marched him along in step.

"Listen to me," he said urgently, under cover of the noise. "This may be your only chance."

They poked him with their phasers. The door to the control room loomed ahead.

"Garth will destroy all of us if you don't help me stop him," Kirk continued to the air before him. "He's using you. All he wants is power for himself. I brought you something that might have cured you, but he destroyed it."

There was no answer. Why did he continue to try reasoning with these madmen, anyhow? But at the moment there seemed to be nothing else to try.

The control room was empty. The closing of the door cut the music off. The blades of the force-field switch gleamed invitingly only a few yards away.

"If I can get a patrol in here, they'll bring more of the medicine. Garth will be finished and all of us will be safe again. Safe, and well."

Stolidly, one of the guards waved him to a chair. Kirk shrugged and sat down. There was what seemed to be an immensely long wait.

Then Garth came in, still in uniform but no longer wearing the crown. In one hand he was carrying a small flask packed with glittering crystals.

"Well done," he said to the guards. "Kirk, your resistance has now reached the point of outright stupidity, and is a considerable inconvenience to us. We propose to take sterner measures."

"If it's any further inconvenience to you, I'll be happy to cooperate."

"We shall see. Let us first introduce you to our latest invention." He tossed the flask into the air and caught it with the other hand. "This is an explosive, Captain, the most powerful one in history. Or, let us be accurate, the most powerful of all chemical explosives. This flask can vaporize the entire station; in fact, the crater it would leave would crack the crust of the planet. We trust you do not doubt our word."

"You were quite capable of such a discovery in the past," Kirk said. "I have every reason to believe you still are."

"Good. Here!" Suddenly, Garth tossed the flask to one of the guards. Since the man had only one hand free to catch it, he very nearly dropped it. He was in great haste to throw it back to Garth, who resumed juggling it, laughing.

"How are your nerves, Captain?"

"Excellent, thank you. If it happens to me, it happens to you. That's all I need to know."

"Then we are halfway toward a solution already," Garth said. "Actually, dropping the flask would not so much as break it; the explosive must be set off electrically, from the board. But in fact, I am quite prepared to do so. Do you see why?"

"I can see that you're bluffing."

"Then your logic is deficient. Perhaps we need your friend Spock to help you reason. He is a logical man. Yes, a very logical man." Garth looked briefly at the guards. "Go and bring the Vulcan here to us."

The guards went out. Kirk felt the first surge of real hope in days. To the best of bis knowledge, Spock—the real Spock—had not been taken out of his cell since his first imprisonment, when he had been confronted with impossible odds; and, being logical, had allowed himself to be taken. But in hand-to-hand combat, he was also a machine of outright inhuman efficiency. Sending only two guards to fetch him—and on top of that, aliens who probably had no experience with either the human or the Vulcan styles of infighting—was folly; or so he had to hope.

"In the meantime, Captain, let us expose the logic of the situation to you. It is your responsibility to preserve Federation lives and property—not only your life, Mr Spock's, Governor Cory's, but that of everyone here, even including our own. You need not confirm this; as a sometime officer of the Federation—as our uniform should remind you—this was once our responsibility as well"

"It still is," Kirk said stonily.

"We have higher responsibilities now. Above all, a responsibility to our destiny. To this, you hold the key. We cannot advance further until we are in command of the *Enterprise.* Nor can we expect another such opportunity to arise in the practicable future. It might be said, in short, that if you remain stubborn, we no longer have a future, and are under no further responsibility toward it. Do you follow us so far?"

Kirk was a good distance ahead of him by now, and not at all liking what he found there. Even Spock, he suspected, would have to concede that the trap was indeed logical, however insane.

There was a buzz from the console. Moving sidewise, Garth activated a screen. Kirk could not see what it showed, but Garth obligingly told him.

"Your Vulcan friend is a most ingenious fellow. He has somehow disposed of my associates—who will suffer for their inefficiency—and is coming this way, armed. This could be most amusing."

"The joke is entirely on you," Kirk said. "You'll have no chance to play logic games now. Whichever one of us you shoot first, the other one will have you."

"Our training was as good as yours; the outcome is by no means so inevitable. Indeed, it suggests an even better scheme."

Garth moved behind Kirk, out of sight. This moved him away from the console, which he evidently reconsidered, for a moment later he went back to it—changed.

There were now two Captain Kirks. Even the uniforms were in a nearly identical state of wear and tear now. Smiling, Garth threw in all his previous cards; he even put his phaser out of reach.

Kirk tensed to spring. At the same instant, the door shot open and Spock crouched in it, phaser ready. He seemed prepared for anything except, possibly, what he found; he actually blinked in surprise.

"That's Garth," Garth said urgently, pointing. "Blast him!"

"Hold it, Spock! The madman *wants* you to shoot me!"

"Look at us carefully, Spock. Can't you tell I'm your Captain?"

"Queen to Queen Three," Spock said.

"I won't answer that. It's the one thing he wants to know."

"Very clever, Garth. I was about to say the same thing."

Spock, keeping both Kirks under the gun, crossed to the master switch.

"What are you doing?"

"Arranging to beam down a patrol," Spock said. "I should be interested to hear any objections."

"They'll walk into a trap."

"That's true, Spock. Garth can destroy the whole station instantly if he wants."

The double agreement halted the Science Officer. After a moment he said, "What maneuver did we use to defeat the Romulan torchship off Tau Centi?"

"Conchrane deceleration."

"A standard maneuver with an enemy faster than one's self. Every Starship Captain knows that."

"Agreed, Captain," Spock said to both. "Or Captains. Gentlemen, whichever one of you is Captain Garth must at this moment be expending a great deal of energy to maintain the image of Captain Kirk. That energy level cannot be maintained indefinitely. Since I am half Vulcan, I can outwait you; I have time."

"I propose a simpler solution. Shoot us both."

"Wait, Spock! I agree, he's quite right. But you must *shoot to kill.* It's the only way to ensure the safety of the *Enterprise.*"

Instantly, Spock whirled on Garth and fired. Kirk sprang to the console.

"Kirk to *Enterprise*…"

"Scott here. Queen to Queen's Level Three."

"Queen to King's Level One."

"Aye aye, sir. Orders?"

"Beam down Dr McCoy with the new drug supply—and the security guards with him."

"Aye, sir. Scott out."

Kirk turned. "Well done, Mr Spock. Did you damage either of the guards seriously?"

"I fear I broke the Tellarite's arm."

"A trifle. Help me haul this hulk to the treatment room."

Garth, still unconscious, was in the same chair he had once proposed to use as an instrument of torture; Cory had stripped it of his modifications.

"Dr McCoy, how long does this drug need to take effect?"

"Reversal of arterial and brain damage begins at once, but the rate depends on the individual. I'd say you could start as soon as —great looping comets!"

Garth had still been mimicking Kirk, even while Stunned, a further evidence of his enormous personal drive. But now the change back was beginning; Kirk had forgotten that McCoy hadn't seen the process before.

"All right," McCoy said, swallowing. "Start now."

The chair whined, almost inaudibly. Then Cory cut it off. "That's all I dare give him for a starter."

Garth's eyes opened. They were peaceful but vacant, as though he had no mind left at all. They passed from one captor to another, without recognition. He began to whimper.

Kirk leaned toward him. "Captain."

Garth's moans stopped. He looked pleadingly up at Kirk.

"Captain Garth—I'm James Kirk. Perhaps you remember me."

Garth's expression, or lack of it, did not change. He looked toward Spock, and frowned slightly.

"I am a Federation Science Officer, Captain," Spock said.

"We are from the Starship *Enterprise,*" Kirk said. "I am her Captain."

Garth looked back at Kirk, long and hard. Something was awakening in him, after all. He struggled to speak. Finally the mumbled words became clear.

"Federation—Starship…"

"Yes, sir. The *Enterprise.*"

Cory was watching closely. Garth slowly reached out his hand. Kirk took it.

"A—privilege, sir. My ship is—no, cancel that. I have no ship. I am a Fleet Captain."

"My honor, Captain."

"That's enough," Cory said. He put his arms under Garth's and helped him from the chair. "Thank you, gentlemen. I can manage him now, and the rest of them, I'm sure."

As they moved off, Garth turned for a last look at Kirk. It was now alarmingly penetrating, but still puzzled. "Should I know you, sir?" he asked.

Time for a new beginning. "No, Captain—no."

He was led out. Looking after him, Kirk said, Tell me something, Mr Spock."

"Yes, Captain."

"Why was it so impossible to tell the difference between us?"

"It was not impossible, Captain. Our presence here is proof of that."

"Yes, and congratulations. But what took you so *long?*"

"The interval of uncertainty was actually fairly brief, Captain. It only seemed long—to you. As I threatened then, I could have waited you both out, but you made that unnecessary by proposing that I kill both of you. It was not a decision Garth could have made."

Kirk felt a faint chill. "Excuse me, Mr Spock, but I think that's wrong. He had only just finished readying himself to destroy not only both of us, but the whole station."

"Yes, Captain, I believe he was capable of that. It would have been a grand immolation of his whole scheme. But to die by himself, ignominiously, leaving followers behind to see his defeat—no, I do not believe megalomaniacs think like that."

"I see. Well, there's no doubt about how you think."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes, indeed—fast. *Very* fast." Kirk raised his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Three to beam up, Scotty."

"King," Spock added without a trace of a smile, "to King's Level One."

THE MARK OF GIDEON

(George F. Slavin and Stanley Adams)

"It appears to be Paradise, Mr Spock," said Kirk, handing back the folder of Federation reports and stepping onto the Transporter platform. "It's taken Gideon long enough to agree to negotiating membership in the Federation."

"I'll be interested in hearing your description, Captain," said Spock, taking his place at the console. "Since they have not permitted any surveillance, or any visitors, you appear to be uniquely privileged to visit Heaven early."

"You won't have long to wait," said Kirk. Uhura's voice replied at once to Spock's request for coordinates. Spock set the levers at 875; 020; 079.

"Let's go, Mr Spock."

"Energizing, Captain." Spock did not, of course, smile at Kirk's eagerness to be off.

The Transporter Room shimmered, then steadied. Nothing seemed to have happened.

"Mr Spock," said Kirk, stepping from the platform. "Mr Spock?" There was no one in the Transporter Room but himself.

He clicked the intercom button. "Mr Spock, I have not been transported down, and why have you left your post before confirming? Mr Spock, answer me…"

This was not at all according to regulations. Annoyed, Kirk stamped out of the Transporter Room and headed purposefully toward the bridge. There was nobody there either.

He hit the intercom with increasing irritation. This is the Captain speaking. All bridge personnel report immediately." He folded his arms and waited; there had better be one hell of an explanation. Nothing happened. He switched on the intercom again, alternately calling Engineering, security, Dr McCoy, and listening. There was only silence.

"Lieutenant Uhura, report to the bridge immediately."

The viewing screen showed only the planet Gideon exactly as he had just seen it before stepping onto the Transporter, a perfectly ordinary M-type planet peacefully poised in the screen. The readouts and lights on the bridge consoles continued to operate in their usual conformations.

"Captain Kirk." The smooth voice of Prime Minister Hodin emerged from the communication screen. "The Council is still awaiting your arrival."

A plump figure rose to its feet from among the Councillors of Gideon.

"This discourtesy is unforgivable!" he snapped. "Doesn't your Federation recognize that first impressions are most important?"

Spock blinked. "Captain Kirk was transported down minutes ago, sir."

"That's impossible."

"I transported him myself," said Spock firmly.

"He never arrived here," said Hodin, evenly. Spock stared at Scott, and turned back to the screen.

"He was beamed directly to your Council Chamber. Please check your coordinates, Prime Minister."

Hodin read out from a slip of paper, "875; 020; 079."

Scott nodded.

"Somethings' gone wrong with the Transporter," said Chekov. "Captain Kirk's lost somewhere between the *Enterprise* and Gideon." His voice rose; Speck's expression remained impassive. The planet hung in the viewscreen, enigmatic.

The Prime Minister was speaking insistently. "We provided you with the exact coordinates for this room, Mr Spock. And that is all we were obligated to do. If he is not here it is your own responsibility and that of your staff."

"I do not deny that, Your Excellency. I was not attempting to blame your personnel."

"We are glad to hear that, sir." Hodin's voice sounded almost smug. "We are, in fact, inserting it into the records of this… most unfortunate event."

"Your Excellency, with intricate machinery so delicately balanced as ours, there is always a margin for error," Spock said sharply. "Captain Kirk may have materialized in some other part of Gideon."

Hodin said, "Let's hope it was dry land, Mr Spock."

"Your Excellency, to cut directly to the point, I request permission to beam down and search for the Captain."

Hodin sat back, hands on the table before him. "Permission denied, Mr Spock. Your Federation is well aware of our tradition of isolation from all contaminating contact with the violence of other planets…"

"Your Excellency, the wars between star systems no longer prevail in our galaxy. If you will grant permission…"

"We shall institute a search immediately. In the meantime I suggest you look to your machinery."

"We have already done so, sir," Spock's voice was now extremely controlled. "With regard to permission to land…"

But the Council Chamber had vanished from the screen.

"We must once and for all acknowledge that the purpose of diplomacy is to prolong a crisis," said Spock, deliberately closing the switch.

"What are we waiting for, Mr Spock? *We're* not diplomats," McCoy flung himself on a chair.

"We are representatives of the Federation, Doctor."

"That doesn't mean we have to sit here like school-children and listen to a damfool lecture by some… dip-lo-mat."

"Unfortunately, diplomacy is the only channel open to us at the moment. This planet is shielded from our sensors; we cannot observe it. Therefore we are unable to select coordinates. They have to be given to us. We are bound by Federation's agreements with Gideon." Spock turned to Lt. Uhura. "Contact Starfleet immediately. Advise them of this problem and request permission to use every means at our disposal to locate the Captain."

"D'ye think he's there, Spock?" said Scott. "Or are there any other possibilities?"

"They are endless, Mr Scott."

"Where do we start?" said McCoy helplessly.

Spock leaned over Sulu's console. "Institute three-hundred-and-sixty degree scan, Mr Sulu—one degree at a time."

"You're going to scan space for him? But sir, that could take years!"

"Then the sooner you begin, Mr Sulu, the better," said Spock grimly.

Sweating slightly, Kirk ran from the elevator and pressed a door; it did not budge. He tried to force it with no success. He tried the next door; it opened easily. Standing guardedly in the opening, he pushed it all the way open with his elbow, one hand on the butt of his phaser. It whished slightly in the silence. The tables in the lounge stood as though the crew had just been summoned; a half-finished chess game, a sandwich with a bite out of it, a book dropped carelessly on the floor. But the only sound was Kirk's own breathing. He went out into the corridor again, warily.

Two more doors, locked. The third, labeled "Captain's Quarters," opened to the lightest pressure. His familiar room suddenly seemed alien—no crackle from the intercom, the bunk neatly made up, his books orderly on their shelf; his lounging robe swung eerily in the slight breeze made by the opening door. Momentarily disoriented, he wondered for a wild moment whether he had strayed from his own body and was visiting the *Enterprise* long after he and his crew had perished from the universe.

Footsteps! Dancing footsteps, echoing in the corridor; he pivoted on his now very real heels and stared. At the end of the hall a graceful figure whirled and curtsied, feet pattering gaily on the utilitarian flooring.

She caught sight of Kirk in mid-pirouette, and stopped with a little cry. He reached, and caught her; the sight of a human form brought his sense of reality back with a bump.

"Who the… who are you?"

She frowned, her delicate forehead lovely even when wrinkling; suddenly she smiled.

"Odona… yes. My name is Odona. Why did you bring me here?" She indicated the ship's corridor with a wide gesture.

Kirk was startled. "What are you doing on my ship?"

"This entire ship is yours?"

"It's not my personal property. I'm the Captain."

"And you have all this to yourself?" Her voice was full of wonder.

"At the moment, we seem to have it all to ourselves," Kirk corrected.

Odona smiled, sapphire eyes looking up from under sable lashes. "So it seems. You're hurting me, Captain."

Kirk hastily released her.

"Captain James Kirk. And I did not bring you here, incidentally."

"If you didn't…"

"Exactly. Who did?"

She shrugged helplessly. The decorations bordering her brief tunic twinkled in the lights.

"What happened before you got here?" said Kirk. "Try to remember. It's important."

She puzzled over it for a moment. "I remember… it seems I was standing in a very large auditorium, crowded with people, thousands of people pressed against me so hard I could hardly breathe… I was fighting for breath, screaming to get out and they kept pushing and pushing…" She shuddered.

"Don't be afraid." Kirk placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I'm not." She looked up at him. "But you are troubled?"

Kirk turned away. "I am the only one of my crew left on the *Enterprise.* Out of four hundred and thirty. I may be the only one left alive."

"I am sorry. If only I could help."

"You can," said Kirk earnestly. "Tell me the rest. You were fighting for breath, screaming to get out, and…"

"And suddenly I was here on this… your ship. And there is so much room, so much freedom. I just wanted to float." She smiled impishly. "And then, there you were."

"How long have you been on the *Enterprise?*" Kirk's questions were almost random; any clue, any train of suggestion, might lead him to a solution.

"I don't know. Not long. Does it matter?"

"It might. Come on." He started back toward the bridge.

Odona followed reluctantly.

"Do we have to leave this wonderful open place?"

Kirk glowered at the chronometer in the bridge, gripping Odona's hand. She tried to pull away from him; he held her firmly.

"Half an hour of my life is lost."

Odona stared at him.

"Between the time I tried to leave this ship for Gideon, and the time I found myself here alone, a full half hour disappeared—poof! What happened during that half hour?"

"What is Gideon?"

"Your home, the planet you came from… don't you remember?"

"I don't know any Gideon." She looked at him, apparently utterly lost.

"That's impossible. We were in synchronous orbit over the capital city. I was supposed to beam down. Something went

wrong. You must have been sent aboard from Gideon."

She shook her head, trying to remember.

"I do not think so."

Kirk flipped on the viewing screen. Gideon had vanished. The changing patterns of the stars indicated the forward motion of the ship. Odona moved closer, and put her hand in his.

"We are no longer over Gideon," said Kirk in a flat voice.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know. I don't recognize that quadrant," said Kirk dully.

Odona bit her lip. Thinking aloud, Kirk said, "Odona, you must realize that we are not here together by accident. Someone must have arranged it, for a purpose, an unknown purpose."

A small voice replied, "Captain Kirk, before I said I wasn't afraid. Now, I think I am."

He looked at her with compassion, and they turned back to the incomprehensible pattern of stars.

"Go back two degrees, there was a pulse variation," said Spock. Sulu maneuvered the sensor screen.

"There," said Spock. "There is something. Give me a reading."

Sulu flicked switches. "I can't make it out, sir."

"Get chemical analysis and molecular structure."

Sulu pointed silently at the indicators. Scott, McCoy and Chekov watched anxiously. Spock shook his head.

"Space debris."

Sulu sighed, and resumed tracking.

"Lieutenant Uhura, has Starfleet honored our request with an answer?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Did you impress upon them that the Captain's life is at stake?"

"Of course, Mr Spock," she said indignantly. "But they insisted that the matter had to be referred to the Federation."

"What department?"

"Bureau of Planetary Treaties, sir."

"Contact them directly."

"I already have, Mr Spock. They insist we go though Starfleet channels."

Sulu exploded, spinning in his chair. "With the Captain missing that's the best they could come up with?"

"A bureaucrat," said Spock bitterly, "is the opposite of a diplomat. But they manage to achieve the same results."

He stared at the chronometer. The second indicator . clicked on. The captain was waiting… somewhere. And time was passing inalterably.

Suddenly Uhura's voice broke the tense silence.

"Mr Spock, Gideon is making contact."

McCoy said sourly, "Now we're in for another dose of doubletalk."

"Since we must learn the language of diplomacy in order to deal with our present problem, shall we just listen to what they have to tell us?" said Spock. "Then, Doctor, we can decide on the relative merits of their statements."

Four poker-faced ministers flanked the Prime Minister as he appeared on the viewer. Courteously, Spock began, "Your Excellency, we are pleased to hear that you have news of the Captain."

"Good news!" said the smiling image. "Very good news indeed, Mr Spock. Your Captain is definitely *not* on Gideon. We have made a thorough search, just as you requested. I am sure you will be relieved to know you may now proceed to investigate all the other possibilities, and forget about Gideon."

"But that is not what we requested!"

"It is in the records, Mr Spock," broke in the voice of the Prime Minister. "You asked for a thorough search of Gideon. We have used every means at our disposal to accommodate you, Mr Spock." Outraged astonishment overlaid the diplomat's usual smile.

"Your record on this subject cannot be precise, Excellency."

Hodin waved to an assistant, and took from him a thick book. With ambitious eagerness the assistant had already opened it to a specific passage.

"You do not intend, I hope, that a conference be made the subject of a dispute between Gideon and the Federation, Mr Spock."

"Your Excellency, a dispute is farthest from our minds. It's quite unnecessary to check your documents. I am merely suggesting to you that the language of our request may not have been understood exactly as intended."

Hodin stood up, huffily indignant. He waved his puffy hand.

"Mr Spock, you are an officer of a spaceship. In your profession you make use of many instruments, tools, and… weapons… to achieve your objectives, do you not?"

"Yes, sir."

Hodin's eyes were squinting with an apparent effort to remain diplomatically cool. His posture betrayed him.

"However," he continued, "the only tool diplomacy has is language. It is of the utmost importance that the meaning be crystal clear."

Spock's own posture was of stiff attention.

"I am basically a scientist, Excellency. Clarity of formulation is essential in my profession also."

"I am glad to hear that. Perhaps then you will make a greater effort to choose your words precisely."

The word "precisely" vibrated through the bridge like a red petticoat in a bullring. The crew was coming to a full boil; all hands were fists by now.

McCoy muttered, "Are you going to let him get away with that, Spock?"

"No matter what you say, he'll find a way to twist the meaning," said Scott.

Uhura growled, "How can you stand this, Mr Spock?"

McCoy leaned past Spock to the viewer and spoke directly to Hodin. "Our Captain is lost out there somewhere. We don't care how much you have searched, we are going over every inch of space ourselves. He's got to be down there somewhere. We're going after him!"

Too loudly, Chekov said, "This is no time to stick to rules and regulations, this is an emergency!" McCoy gently pulled him back, and leaned toward the screen again.

"We can't leave without being absolutely positive ourselves that everything has been done," he said. "Surely you can understand our feelings."

Hodin turned back to the screen, smiling.

"Mr Spock. Mr Spock."

"Yes, Your Excellency?"

"Are you still there?" That smile was imperturbable. "There was considerable interference with your transmission. A great deal of noise drowned out your transmission; could you please repeat more clearly?"

McCoy retreated, baffled. "Let me apologize for the *noise,* Your Excellency," said Spock. "To summarize, I request permission to transport down to Gideon."

The Prime Minister looked at his deputies and back at Spock. They all burst out in offensive laughter.

"Forgive me, Mr Spock," Hodin's oily voice resumed. "No criticism of your equipment is intended. But evidently it has sent your Captain on some strange journey—we all still hope a safe one, of course." He bowed formally. "But it could create for us a grave incident with your Federation. And now you propose to repeat the disaster with yet another officer? Are you mad?"

Scott shouted, "I'll not take that, Mr Spock. The Transporter was in perfect condition… I pairsonally guarantee that mysel'. Transport me down there this minute and I'll be proving it to those… those… gentlemen!"

The chill in Spock's quick glance froze Scott in his tracks.

"I could not quite make that out, Mr Spock. Would you be so good as to repeat what you said?" Hodin gave every appearance of amusement at the antics of the crew.

"The ship's engineer was saying that the malfunction that existed has now been repaired," said Spock, a quelling eye on Scott. "We would like to test it immediately. I would like to transport down to your Council Chamber."

"But, Mr Spock, you…"

Spock interrupted Hodin. "Your Excellency, grant this one request."

"You are a very persistent fellow, Mr Spock."

A moment of tension passed while Hodin again consulted with his staff.

"All right, Mr Spock." A whistling sound passed through the bridge as the entire crew released held breath. "You shall test the skill of your… er… very excitable repairman."

Scott's teeth ground in Chekov's ear. "He doesna ken what excitable is…" Chekov grinned at him, and whispered, "But he's letting him go… Wait."

"There is one further proviso. We cannot risk additional incident. You will therefore transport a member of my staff to your ship. Let us first see if that works."

"Thank you, Your Excellency. Your proposal is accepted." Spock turned to Scott. "Transporter Room, Mr Scott, on the double."

"At once, Mr Spock," said Scott, rather stiffly. He stalked to the elevator and punched the door.

On the screen, yet another assistant with a large book was talking to Hodin, who looked up.

"My assistant will provide you with the proper, what is the word?"

"Co-or-di-nates," said Spock, very clearly.

"Thank you. You may proceed."

The Gideonite assistant placed himself at a corner of the Council Chamber.

"875," he said.

"875, Mr Scott," said Spock.

"875, aye."

"020."

"020."

"709."

"709?" The last number was repeated. Spock hesitated for a moment.

'709, Mr Scott. Energize."

"Mr Spock, the young gentleman from Gideon is here," Scott reported triumphantly.

"Very good, Mr Scott." Spock turned to the screen. "Your assistant is safely arrived, Your Excellency. And now we would like to send down myself and if possible, a few technicians to follow through on…"

"Now, now, now, Mr Spock. Not so fast. That is quite a different matter. We agreed to allow one representative on our soil, your Captain alone. Now you suggest a 'few technicians.' And will the Federation then demand an army of 'technicians' to hunt for these?"

Patiently, Spock said, "I will demand only one thing, Prime Minister; that I be permitted to beam down to your planet to search for the Captain."

"Your request," said Hodin, smoothly triumphant, "will be brought to the floor at the next session of Gideon's Council. Er… do not look forward to a favorable reply."

"Your Excellency!" Spock pressed the switch several times rapidly; the screen remained blank. He hit, the intercom.

"Mr, Scott. Send the gentleman from Gideon home."

"I was just beginning to think you might find a new career as a diplomat, Spock," said McCoy.

"Do not lose hope, Doctor. Lt. Uhura, contact Starfleet Command. Demand an instant reply to our request for permission to land on Gideon."

The room was tense as Uhura operated her console.

"*Enterprise* to Starfleet Command."

"*Enterprise* to Starfleet Command."

"*Enterprise* to Starfleet Command." Kirk and Odona bent over the console, Kirk's fingers expertly flicking the controls.

"Captain Kirk here. Red Priority Alert. Do you read me? Red Priority Alert." The console impassively continued its normal light patterns.

"Isn't it working?" said Odona.

"It seems to be all right." Kirk flipped the manual control and held it open.

"Kirk here. Answer please. Red Priority Alert."

"If it is working someone must hear you," Odona said hopefully.

"There's nothing. If they do hear they aren't replying."

"Why would they do that?"

"They wouldn't." Kirk glanced quizzically at her, then crossed the bridge to Sulu's board. With a few swift motions he altered the setting so that the lights showed a different pattern.

"I'm taking the ship out of warp speed."

"Out of what?" Odona looked utterly baffled.

Kirk laughed. "Space terminology. We're no longer moving faster than light. I trimmed her down to sublight speed till we can find out where we are."

"It doesn't feel any different."

"Well, no." Kirk was amused. Abruptly, his smile faded. "Maybe it isn't." He stared at the other consoles, one by one. No change was apparent. He turned on the forward viewing screen. No motion was visible in the star-filled sky, still and remote.

"Has the ship slowed down?"

"If we can believe the screen, it has."

"Oh, don't tell me the *sky* is out of order now!"

They stood side by side watching the glittering heavens; behind them the console lights moved in rhythmic silence. Odona said softly, "It's so quiet, and peaceful."

"It isn't really, you know. Out there, it's…" As he turned his head to look at her he felt fingers against his lips.

"And it's beautiful," she said.

Kirk looked back at the panoply on the screen, and at the delicate oval face in its black wings of hair.

"And it's beautiful. Very beautiful."

"We're all alone here. Can it last a long, long time?" Her eyes were raised to his, sparkling. His arm slipped around her.

"How long would you like it to last?"

"Forever." Odona's voice was barely audible.

"Let's see now. Power; that's no problem, it regenerates. Food; we had a five years' supply for four hundred and thirty. For two of us that should last…"

"Forever?"

Their eyes met, and her hands touched his shoulders. He pulled her closer. She said in a trembling voice, "All my life I've dreamed of being alone…"

The startling intensity of her "alone" woke Kirk; the moment was broken. Gently he released her. She stood, her arms still raised, eyelids lowered, her expression rapt.

"Most people are afraid of being alone," Kirk said.

She opened her eyes and looked him in the face.

"Where I live people dream of it."

"But why? What makes the people of Gideon dream of being alone?" His voice had recovered its tone of impersonal interest.

"I…" she caught herself. Her expression of puzzlement returned. "Gideon? I told you I don't know where my home is." She shook her head.

"It might well be Gideon." Kirk appraised her coolly.

"Does it matter so much?" She started toward him, her hands out.

"It might help me locate our position." She stopped. Her hands dropped to her sides. She shrugged, almost imperceptibly.

"And then you might find your crew. Being here with you, I forgot there were others. I envy your sense of loyalty." She drew close to him. "I wish I could ease your fear for your friends."

Kirk shook his head. "I *must* make contact with whoever is manipulating us. I've got to find a way…" He paced the room, stopping in front of each of the consoles, willing them to reveal something, the smallest clue. Suddenly he whirled and faced the girl.

"Odona, can't you remember why your people want so much to be alone?"

A wave of utter panic swept over her face. She shivered, although there was no change in the temperature.

"Because they cannot ever be."

"Why not?"

"There are so many." He could hardly hear her reply. She lifted her head. A shuddering force seemed to rise from her slender body.

"So many… so many. There is no place, no street, no house, no garden, no beach, no mountain that is not filled with people. If he could, each one would kill to find a place to be alone. If he could, he would die for it."

She stared at him, tears creeping down her cheeks, supporting herself on Uhura's chair. She looked exhausted.

"Why were you sent here, Odona?" Kirk put the question compassionately.

Her head lifted proudly. "No one commands Odona. I was not sent here."

Kirk strode to her side, and took her face in his hands.

"Have you come here to kill?"

Her tearstained face was shocked; unable to answer, her lips formed a soundless "no."

"Have you come here to die?"

"I don't know. I don't care… I only know I am here. I only know I am happy here." She threw her arms around his neck and clung to him, desperately. The trouble in her eyes moved Kirk as her coquetry had failed to do. He kissed her, gently, then more urgently. Yet in the back of his mind the images evoked by her tormented outcry haunted him; faces of people yearning for solitude, young, old, men, women and children unable to draw a breath that was not their neighbor's.

The stars on the viewscreen ignored them.

Suddenly Kirk drew back his arm with an exclamation. She flinched.

"I have done something wrong?"

"No." Kirk smiled ruefully. But he let her go, and pulled up his sleeve. There was a bruise on his forearm. Blood made a tiny dome in its center.

"Why does it take so long?" Odona asked, peering at it.

"Long? What?"

"The bruise. It stays the same."

"And the irritation gets worse. If Dr McCoy were here he'd take care of it with a simple wave of his medical tricorder."

It was obviously the same as if he had said "his wand" to Odona, but she said, "I would willingly give up some of this glorious space to Dr McCoy, if he could take away your… irritation."

"They took Dr McCoy, but they had to leave Sickbay," said Kirk. He took her arm and steered her to the elevator.

On the bridge of the other *Enterprise,* Uhura, Chekov, Scott and McCoy were intently scanning the viewscreen. Spock stood at attention in the Captain's position. Over the air the voice of the Starfleet Admiral, slightly distorted by its long journey, sounded extremely stern.

"I sympathize deeply, but Starfleet cannot override Federation directives in this matter."

"The crew will not understand it, Admiral."

"Damn straight," muttered McCoy.

"Has your crew suddenly become interested in provoking a war, Mr Spock? That is hardly Starfleet's mission."

"We only want to save the life of the Captain," repeated Spock.

"You have not proved your case to the Federation, or even to Starfleet, for that matter," said the Admiral.

"What's the matter wi' them all?" said Scott in a surly voice. "Ye'd think naebody but us care at all…"

Spock shushed him with a wave of his hand behind his back.

"I'm positive I will be able to do so to your satisfaction, Admiral. It has been clear to me since my first exchange of, er… courtesies with the Prime Minister that they have taken the Captain prisoner."

"Granted, Mr Spock."

"I know now precisely where the Captain is being held." A stunned silence gripped the crew.

"Leave it to Spock, every time," whispered Uhura. Scott nodded.

"? If he is at the same place to which we transported him," Spock went on.

"They would not dare to harm him in the Council Chamber!" The Admiral was outraged.

"That is not where the Captain is, Admiral. He is being held nearby."

"Well! You have now answered What and Where. I now await your explanation of Why."

"Since this planet is shielded from our sensors, by Federation agreement, Admiral, we cannot possibly establish that without on-the-spot investigation."

"Mhm. What evidence have you that the Captain's life is threatened?"

"Why else would they keep him?"

"I'm afraid that's not good enough, Mr Spock. Permission denied."

Spock took a deep breath, fists clenched. "I wish personally to go on record that this decision is completely arbitrary."

"So noted." The screen blipped off.

"Diplomats!" exploded Scott. "What did you mean, Mr Spock? Didn't we beam the Captain into the Council Chamber?"

"Quiet, please!" Mr Spock broke through the agitated babble. "No, Mr Scott, Gideon supplied us with two different sets of coordinates; one for the Captain, and one for our… er… recent guest." As Scott looked doubtful, he said, 'The Captain's Log is evidence enough—I hope." He turned to the ship's memory. The crew stared at the numbers on the readout.

"You're right, Mr Spock!"

"Look at that!"

"What kind of finagle is this?" Scott turned to Spock, hands on hips and a glare in his eye.

"What now, Mr Spock?" said McCoy. "Are we to sit here and wait with our hands folded for the Captain to reappear?"

"This is typical of top echelon isolation." Spock's dry voice conveyed disgust. "They are too far away from the elements that influence crew morale."

"At times like this I don't think they remember that there is such a thing," said McCoy furiously.

"It is unfortunate. But for the first time in my career, I am forced to violate a direct order from Starfleet."

"Hear, hear!" shouted Scott. That's absolutely the right decision, Spock. I'm with you!"

"One hundred percent!" That was Chekov; it was very clear that if Starfleet Command could but hear them the entire crew would be tried for insubordination—at the least.

"I shall beam down there at once." Spock's resolute calm stirred everybody into action; positions were taken.

"Mr Scott, the con is yours."

"Aye, but ye'll be needing me along," said Scott, protesting.

"The Captain will be needing all of you at your posts." This reminder had the desired effect; subdued, Scott headed for the elevator behind Spock.

"It might be taken as an invasion," McCoy whispered to Scott. "I'll pick up my medical tricorder and meet you in the Transporter Room, Mr Spock."

"No, Dr McCoy; I cannot assume responsibility for ordering a fellow officer to violate a Starfleet directive. I go alone."

"Well, that's just about the worst decision you'll ever make, Spock," grumbled McCoy. "I hope you won't regret it."

As he entered the elevator, Spock said, "I'm sure this won't take long." McCoy held out his hand in a good-luck gesture. Spock shook it solemnly, and the doors closed.

"Isn't that just what Captain Kirk said?"

Chekov's words echoed in the suddenly quiet room.

Odona wandered around Sickbay, fingering pieces of equipment, peering curiously at instruments, spelling out the names of chemicals.

"If I can find a medical tricorder I'll be cured in no time," said Kirk, rummaging in a cabinet.

"Cured?"

"My arm," said Kirk patiently. "The pain would be gone."

"Oh. What will happen if you do not find it? Will you become sick? Will you, uh, die?"

Kirk looked at her, astonished. "Of this little scratch? Of course not. It would heal itself, eventually. It's just a simple…" He looked closely at the little wound.

"Or is it?" Recollections of biological sampling, blood tests, other scientifically motivated wounds went through his mind. Had

someone wanted something of his tissues? Well, there was no telling. He turned back to the cabinet.

"All this is needed to cure those who are… sick?" Odona was examining the autoclave. Kirk nodded.

"It is cruel. Why are they not allowed to die?"

"What did you say?"

"Why don't you let them die?"

Her hand lay on the cauterizer; Kirk jumped.

"Don't touch that!"

He was a fraction of a second too late; Odona had bumped the switch; a jet of flame streaked out. Kirk jerked her away from the machine and switched off the flame in one motion.

"Are you hurt?"

"Just my hand." Odona had not even blinked, had not cried out. Was this a spartan self-control—or something else?"

"Let me see it." She covered her damaged hand.

"It's nothing."

He pulled the hand gently but firmly into the light. Her forefinger was burnt completely away.

"My God!" Kirk's grip tightened with sympathetic horror. She withdrew her hand.

"The pain is already gone. Don't worry." Her voice was quite calm.

"Sutures… it's already cauterized… shock…" Kirk plunged at the cabinet.

"Wait." She was utterly unperturbed. "It's already healing."

Kirk glanced at the hand she held out to him and lurched into the cabinet door. A tiny forefinger had already appeared where a moment ago had been a raw wound. As he goggled, the finger grew before his eyes. In a matter of minutes Odona's hand was as whole as ever.

"See?" she said. "Why did you worry so much? This is strange to you?"

"Regeneration…" he muttered. "Injuries heal themselves?'

"Just as your arm will," she said, reassuringly.

"No. I have never seen anything like this before. Do all your people have this capacity?"

"Of course."

"They do not fall sick. Or die."

Once again the fleeting expression of panic swept over her face.

"That is why they long for death," Kirk said slowly, gazing at her. "So many, no one ever dying…"

He became aware of a sound—a sound not due to his own or Odona's movements. It grew in his consciousness to a steady throb.

"Do you hear that?" he asked. Odona nodded. Kirk prowled the room, listening at the walls for the direction of the sound. He checked his watch; it timed at seventy-two beats per minute. Odona put her hand to her forehead.

"It sounds like an engine," she offered.

"The ship's engine makes no sound."

"But there is something wrong with the equipment. Could that be it?"

"I know every sound on this ship; this is coming from outside," said Kirk, trying to recollect what the timing had reminded him about.

"Is it a storm?"

"We wouldn't hear a storm in here. Come along, it's not coming from here, at any rate."

They moved cautiously along the corridor, Kirk leading the girl by the hand. Her hand was cold, and a little damp. She must be terrified. The pulse of sound went on, no louder and no less. Kirk stopped at a viewing port in the observation corridor.

"We can see outside from here—if it works." He depressed a button. Nothing happened. He reached for the manual control lever. The panel slid open.

To his horrified amazement, the port was filled with the faces he had imagined when Odona had burst out with her passionate yearning for solitude. Silently screaming, the faces filled his vision with distress and longing. He fell back a step, glanced at Odona. When he looked at the screen again it showed only the still and starlit skies.

Sharply he asked, "What did you see?"

"People… the faces of people; and stars."

She turned to him, pale. "What is it? What's happening?"

The sound stopped as suddenly as it had begun. He remembered; the beat had been identical with the human heartbeat. Thousands of people outside the ship, pressing against it with their bodies.

"You said we were moving through space."

"Yes."

"Then there couldn't really be people out there."

"There could," Kirk said grimly. "Someone could be creating an illusion in our minds. Why would they want to do that, Odona?"

She shrank from him. He saw that her forehead was beaded with perspiration.

"I don't know. I don't know anything. Why do you ask me?"

"I wonder… if we were convinced of a location, we would stop searching. We might be content: to stay here, mightn't we?"

"Be… content." Odona's pallor belied her calm. Suddenly he was irritated and tired of trickery.

"Where is my crew, girl? Are they dead? Have you killed them to have the ship to yourself ?"

She shivered in his grasp, scarlet patches flaming her cheeks. Her sapphire eyes had lost their sparkle, looked dull and sunken.

"No, no, I don't know anything. Please, Captain, something strange is happening to me. I never felt like this…"

"Neither have I," said Kirk, as cold as ice.

"Am I sick? Is this… dying?" she whispered, clinging to a doorframe. Her weight fell on Kirk's arms as he gripped her firmly.

"You do not know of sickness," he said. "You have none on your planet. What kind of…"

"Now there will be… sickness, now there will be death!" Her voice died in a whisper as she fainted, smiling.

"What the blue…" Kirk caught her. Bearing her in his arms he started straight back to Sickbay. As he approached the door he was arrested by the sound of pounding feet coming down the corridor.

"Hodin!"

Guards surrounded him as Hodin ponderously walked toward Kirk and his burden.

"Yes, Captain. Our experiment has passed the first stage."

The explanation would have to wait.

"Let me by," he said urgently. "I must help her."

"No," said Hodin, quietly. "We do not want any of your medicines."

"But she's very ill. Look at her—she needs help, and at once."

"We are grateful for her illness. Thank you, Captain. You have done more than you know for us."

Kirk thought they must be mad. He looked at Odona. Her eyelids fluttered. Hodin spoke gravely.

"My dear daughter, you have done well." He took the limp form from Kirk and turned away. The deputation closed in around the baffled Captain.

"Guard him well, we shall need him for a long time," called Hodin over his shoulder.

In total perplexity Kirk marched along with his guard. What had happened to his crew? This corridor along which they were now walking was unfamiliar; not aboard the *Enterprise,* then. Well, where *was* the *Enterprise?* Why did this diplomat want his daughter to die? Perhaps he could take comfort from the fact that he alone had been tricked; perhaps crew and ship were safe elsewhere. They drew near to the "Captain's Quarters" and he heard voices. He halted, despite the guards' effort to press him along.

"I must see him," came the faint tone of Odona.

"Yes, yes. But now you must lie still." Hodin's voice had lost some of its smoothness. "Do you feel great pain?"

"My arms… and… thighs…"

Avid, yet tender, Hodin said, "What is it like?"

"It is like… like when we have seen that the people have no hope, Father. You felt… great despair. Your heart was heavy because you could do nothing. It is like that."

"You have great courage, my daughter. I am very proud of you." Hodin closed the door softly behind him. Kirk stepped toward him anxiously.

"Let me see her."

"Not yet."

"You don't know what illness she has. Maybe I can tell."

Hodin looked at him gravely. "We know. She has Vegan choriomeningitis."

"Oh, my God." Kirk stepped back; "If she is not treated at once, within twenty-four hours, she will die. I know; it nearly killed me."

Hodin nodded. "Yes, Captain. We learned of your medical history, as we did the plan of a starship, during the negotiations. We brought you here to obtain the microorganisms."

"So that's how my arm was hurt."

"My apologies. As you have learned, we have no medical practitioners. We were unforgivably awkward to have inflicted pain on you…"

"You mean you deliberately infected your own daughter…" Overcome with fury, Kirk turned on his guards. His right fist shot out and caught one in the midriff; as he doubled up with a grunt, Kirk lashed out at the other and leaped for the door of Odona's sickroom. But the first man had recovered and dived at Kirk's feet, bringing him down; the second guard pulled him roughly up and dragged him back to Hodin.

"We do not wish to hurt you. You will see her as soon as we are certain she is susceptible."

"You *are* mad!" cried Kirk in frustrated rage.

"No, Captain. We are desperate. Bring him along to the Council Chamber."

The chamber was a scene of excited chatter, the deputies of Gideon's government descending upon Hodin, demanding, "How is she? What has happened?"

Hodin waved them to their places around the table. Kirk was brought forward between his guards.

"Your report to the Federation was a tissue of lies," he said angrily. "You described Gideon as a Paradise."

"And so it was… once. A long time ago it was as we described it. In the germ-free atmosphere of Gideon people flourished in physical and spiritual perfection, Captain. The life-span was extended and extended, until finally death comes only to the very ancient, when regeneration is no longer possible.

These gifts, Captain, have been our reward for respecting life."

"Most people would envy you."

"We no longer find this condition enviable. Births have increased our population until Gideon is encased in a living mass of beings without rest, without peace, without joy."

"Then why have you not introduced measures to make your people sterile?"

"They do not work," said Hodin simply. "All known techniques are defeated by our organs' capacity to regenerate, like my daughter's hand."

"There are other ways to prevent conception, however."

"This is our dilemma, Captain. Life is sacred to our people. This is the one unshakable tradition. Yet we pay for the gifts that the worship of life has brought us, and the price is very heavy. Because of our overwhelming love of life we have the gifts of regeneration and longevity."

"And misery."

"That is the contradiction."

"The reality, Hodin."

Hodin flinched. He turned his back for a moment, then walked back and forth, the tortured confusion of his mind all too apparent.

"What are we to do? We cannot deny the truth of what has shaped us as we are. We are not capable of interfering with the Creation we love so deeply. It is against our natures."

"Yet you can kill your own daughter. How can you Justify that?"

"We are not killing her. It is the disease that will or will not kill her; this is not under our control. The opportunity came to us, perhaps as a gift; we have seized upon it to readjust the life cycle of this planet. My daughter had hoped you might be brought to feel the agony of Gideon, Captain. It is impossible; no stranger could realize the horror of existence.

"I will not ask you to understand my personal grief; nor will I parade it to gain your cooperation." Hodin had stopped pacing, and faced Kirk proudly.

"My daughter has won my pride, as she has always had my love. She has freely chosen to take this chance with her life, as all the people of Gideon are free to choose. And she cannot be sure she is right."

This virus is rare. Where do you intend to get it?" said Kirk, grappling with the first of these problems that he felt able to handle.

The smooth diplomatic mask slipped over Hodin's face. Kirk was suddenly wary.

"Your blood will provide it, Captain. You will be staying here."

Kirk slammed the table with the flat of his hand.

"Not me, Hodin. You have other ways to solve your problem. I do not offer my Me for this purpose at all; I have other commitments. And I have other hopes for Odona than death."

"My daughter hoped you would love her—enough to stay."

Kirk looked hard at him. "What passed between your daughter and me was between us alone."

"She pleaded with you to stay."

"You watched us, didn't you?"

Hodin bowed his head in admission. "We are desperate. And privacy is perhaps of less concern to us than to you."

"I'm desperate too, you…"

Kirk was interrupted by a buzzer. A message was delivered to Hodin, who raised his head in proud sorrow.

"You may go to her now. She is calling for you. You cannot leave quite yet, Captain, can you?"

"Spock to *Enterprise.* Spock to *Enterprise.*"

"Scott here, Mr Spock."

"Mr Scott, I am speaking to you from the bridge of the *Enterprise.*"

"Ye're what, man?"

"Speaking from the bridge of the *Enterprise,* Mr Scott.

"Those were the coordinates you gave me!"

"They were correct. I am apparently on an exact duplicate of the *Enterprise.*"

"What's that? Is it in orbit?"

"You could say so; Gideon is in orbit, this ship is on Gideon."

"Weel, that's a beginning, Spock. What about the Captain?"

"I'm sure he's somewhere here, Mr Scott. I'm picking up life readings locally. Spock over and out."

Kirk knelt by the side of the bunk where Odona lay, flushed with fever, her cloud of silvery black hair tarnished and lifeless. He looked up at Hodin.

"If you do not let me get Dr McCoy it will soon be too late for her."

"We have told you, Captain Kirk. It is her wish and mine that there be no interference with the natural development of this precious virus."

"What is the matter with you? If she lives, her blood would contain the virus just as mine does. She doesn't have to die."

"She must die. Our people must believe in this escape."

"She is so young…"

"Because she is young she will be an inspiration to our people. Don't you see, Captain, she will become a symbol for others to follow? In time, Gideon will once again be the Paradise it was…"

Odona's sigh pierced the shell of exaltation Hodin had erected around his consciousness. Kirk smoothed her blazing forehead;

Hodin stood by her bedside in a state of misery. But Odona's weary eyes only gazed at Kirk.

"I… am glad you are here. Is my time short?"

"Very short," Kirk whispered.

"I asked you to make the journey last forever." She smiled wanly. "It began here, didn't it?"

Kirk spoke very clearly, hoping to penetrate the feverish haze that surrounded her senses.

"The journey can continue. If you will let me, I can make you well."

"Lake your arm?"

He nodded hopefully. She lay still, expressionless. Then, with a slight cry, she raised her arms to embrace him. The delicacy that had given her such grace in health now gave her too much fragility in his arms. He willed her with all his might to agree to be cured.

"I am not afraid of… what will happen. I am not at all afraid," she murmured feebly against his shoulder. "It's only that now… I wish it could be… with you… forever…" Her voice sank. Gently Kirk laid her unconscious head on the pillow.

The door closed with a decisive snap.

"I am glad to see you looking so well, Captain. Apparently Starfleet's analysis was correct after all." Spock's cool words cut into the air.

Kirk whirled; it *was* Spock. "I'm fine," he managed to say. "But we do have a patient." He lifted Odona from the bed. Hodin stood, paralyzed.

"Spock to *Enterprise*. Spock to *Enterprise* Three to beamup Mr.Scott," Spock slipped the words out with machine-gun speed.

Three—? Er—same coordinates, Mr Spock?"

Scott had obviously grasped the need for haste.

Hodin plunged at Spock with an inarticulate sound of fury.

"Your Excellency, please do not interfere." As the sparkles replaced the three figures, Mr Spock's last, "I already have enough to explain to upper echelons, Prime Minister," hung in the air over Hodin's impotent rage.

"I am… cured?" Odona's tone wavered between disappointment and wonder.

"Completely." Kirk lifted her to her feet and stood smiling down at her brightened eyes.

"Then I can now take your place on Gideon," she said gravely.

"Is that what you want to do?" Kirk was very serious, yet a small smile crossed his face as he watched her. She touched his cheek tenderly, lightly.

"That is what I must do. I am needed there."

Kirk kissed her hand, a gesture of salute to her gallantry—and a farewell. "People like you are needed everywhere, Odona."

They walked side by side into the corridor.

"Will you sign this, please, sir?" A young crewman held out a clipboard to Kirk. He scrawled his initials, and in the bustle of traffic in the corridor he saw her watching a couple stroll hand in hand toward the lounge. As she caught his eye, the wistfulness in her face vanished. She smiled.

"It's different from our *Enterprise.*"

"It's almost exactly the same," said Kirk. "Only this one works." He added wryly, "And it's crowded."

She laughed. "Does it seem so to you?"

"It does now."

"Excuse me, Captain, but before this young lady goes home we are obliged to devise some way to complete our mission. The Prime Minister, you may recall, was somewhat agitated when we last saw him." Spock was apologetic, but quite firm.

Kirk clapped a hand to his head. "Foof, I was forgetting him. Call McCoy and Scott; we'll confer on the bridge."

"Captain," said Spock very formally. "I beg leave to report that I have broken regulations. Starfleet Command gave specific orders which I, upon my own responsibility, disobeyed. In view of Prime Minister Hodin's intransigence to date…"

"If you mean father," said Odona, "he did not really want me to volunteer for this sickness at all. He will be grateful to have me back, and if I am carrying the virus, all will be well."

"He wanted you to be a symbol for your people," said Kirk thoughtfully. "He was quite impassioned about that, Odona."

"He had to have some way to live with himself, letting me die, Captain," said Odona gently. "I haven't died. Perhaps there may be some way to inspire our people, nevertheless."

Spock was frowning into his console. "I wonder," he said. "There are many ways to gather public approval—besides the sacrifice of… er… young women."

There was a silence; each of them cast about in his mind for alternatives. Hodin required something that would serve to call forth volunteers from his people for infection with a deadly disease; and this was a unique public relations problem for the crew of the *Enterprise* to consider.

"In the old days of medicine…" began McCoy. "I seem to recall that there was some sort of signal… illness aboard, doctor required; I don't quite remember…"

Spock laughed. "Bravo, Doctor!" He punched rapidly at his console. "Here it is; a distress flag, flown by seagoing vessels… the design sounds simple enough."

Uhura rose from her seat. "I'll see to it at once." She left the room quickly.

"What is it? What are you doing?" Odona was unable to follow their rapid trains of thought. Kirk smiled to himself. This time her puzzlement was genuine.

"What we propose, madame, is to send you home with a badge of honor," said Spock. "When you show it to your father, he can offer such badges to all your people who volunteer for the… service he so urgently wishes to render them. This will make it a matter of pride to have such a badge in the family, and thus serve the same purpose as your death was designed to do."

Uhura returned with a small flag, as described by Spock. Kirk took it from her, and going up to Odona, while the crew stood at full attention, he pinned it ceremoniously to her shoulder.

"For service to Gideon above and beyond the call of duty," he intoned. He hesitated, then kissed her on both cheeks. "An old custom of some of our people," he said, smiling at her blush.

"Will you stay on the ship?" she whispered.

He looked at her quickly. In that moment he recognized the ambiguity of her question, and replied unmistakably.

"On *this* ship, I will stay, Odona."

She said wistfully, "Forever?"

"Sometimes I think so," he said, very quietly. "But this is my ship, my dear." He struck at the intercom.

"Kirk to Transporter Room. One to beam down to Gideon."

Later, McCoy asked, "Captain, is the Federation really all that anxious to gain the membership of what is now more or less a plague planet?"

"That," said Kirk, with a glance at Spock, "will be for the diplomats to decide."

THE LIGHTS OF ZETAR

(Jeremy Tarcher and Shari Lewis)

The *Enterprise* was enroute to Memory Alpha when the storm first appeared. Memory Alpha was a planetoid set up by the Federation solely as a central library containing the total cultural history and scientific knowledge of all planetary Federation members. The ship had a passenger, Lt. Mira Romaine, an attractive woman of about thirty. She was on board to supervise the transfer of newly designed equipment which the *Enterprise* was also carrying. At the moment, she was on the bridge talking to Scott at his position.

"Mr Scott, I hope I haven't been too much trouble to you with all the questions I've asked."

"Well, I'm sorry the trip is coming to an end," Scott said. "I'm going to miss your questions."

Kirk watched them amusedly. "Present position, Mr Chekov?"

"On course—one seventy-two mark four."

"Mr Scott, as soon as we are within viewing range of Memory Alpha, you and Lt. Romaine will go to your stations in the emergency manual monitor. Prepare for direct transfer of equipment."

"Yes, Captain."

"We're ready, sir," Mira added.

"Lieutenant," Spock said, "may I offer my congratulations on what will be a first in the Federation."

"And good luck," Kirk added.

"Thank you, Mr Spock, Captain."

"I didn't think Mr Scott would go for the brainy type," Chekov said, almost too softly for Kirk to overhear.

"I don't think he's even noticed she has a brain. Has she?" Sulu said. A red light came up on his panel. "Captain, I am picking up a high intensity reading. Shall I display it?"

"Yes." Kirk looked at the main viewing screen. In the blackness of space there was a faint light source. "Is that Memory Alpha?"

"No, sir."

"Magnification eight."

The light now showed as a cloud of vaguely organic shape, almost like a brain. It sparked and flashed intermittently in varied hues, like a series of inspired thoughts.

"Is that some kind of storm?" Kirk said.

"Quite possible, Captain," Spock said. "I've never seen one of such great intensity and strange conformation."

"Captain," Sulu added, "it is approaching at warp two point six and accelerating."

"Recheck your readings, Mr Sulu. It is impossible for a natural phenomenon to move faster than the speed of light."

"It is definitely doing so," Spock confirmed—and indeed the thing was visibly growing on the screen. "It therefore cannot be a phenomenon of nature."

"Deflector on. Condition yellow."

The light source filled the screen. The glare was almost unbearable. Then the screen went blank.

Kirk tried to snap out an order and found that he could not. The whole bridge was suddenly deathly silent. No one moved.

Then, just as abruptly, it was over. "Mr Sulu, full scan on that turbulence or whatever it was!" Kirk noticed Scott staring uncertainly over Kirk's own shoulder. Turning to see what he was looking at, he was just in time to see Mira crumple out of sight behind the command chair.

"Mira!" Scott leapt from his post, knelt beside her and lifted her head off the floor. "Mira!"

She murmured unintelligibly. It was not that the sounds were indistinct, but as though they were in an unknown language.

"What's that you're saying?" Scott said. Kirk and Spock were now also bending close. The strange murmuring went on.

McCoy came onto the bridge and crossed at once to the group, his tricorder already out and in use. He said, "Was she hurt by the fall or by the action of that… disturbance?"

"I don't know," Kirk said. "You were closest, Scotty. Did you notice?"

"She collapsed when it was over."

McCoy gave her a shot. The murmuring died away. Her expression changed from a curiously rapt look to one of relaxation. Then her eyes opened and she looked around in confusion.

"Easy now," Scott said. "You took quite a fall."

"I'm fine now," she said.

"Let me be the judge," McCoy said. "Can you walk to Sickbay?"

"Doctor, I'm fine, really I am." Again she looked around the bridge, obviously still puzzled. "Is everyone else—all right?"

"Aye, they are," Scott said. "You do just as Dr McCoy says."

"Why? I never felt better in my—"

"Lieutenant, report to Sickbay," Kirk said. "That's an order."

"Yes, sir." She followed McCoy resignedly toward the elevator.

Scott said, "Would it be all right for me to go to Sickbay?"

"You will stay at your post, Mr Scott. Lt. Uhura, damage report, all stations."

"All stations are operative."

"Mr Spock?"

"Some equipment was temporarily out of order. My sensors were inoperative."

"Any damage to the warp engines?"

"None, Captain."

"Good. From the action of that—that storm, we may need all the speed we can get."

"It was not a storm, Captain," Spock said.

"Mr Chekov, get a fix on whatever it was and try to project its path… That was a novel experience for the *Enterprise.* Would you agree, Mr Spock?"

"Unforgettable, Captain."

"Yes? I was hoping you had an explanation."

"None at the moment, Captain. Only a sharply etched memory of what I felt during the onslaught."

"Memory Alpha was hailing us a moment before," Uhura said. "I wanted to respond, but I couldn't make my hand move."

"It was not hands that were paralyzed, it was eyes," Chekov said. "I couldn't force my eyes to look down to set a new course."

"No," Sulu said, "speech was affected. I couldn't utter a sound."

"Nor could I," Kirk said. "You seemed to be having the same trouble, Mr Spock."

"Yes, Captain, I was."

"Any explanation yet?"

"Only of the result," Spock said, "none of the cause. In each case, different areas of the brain were affected. Our voluntary nerve functions were under some form of pressure."

"Or of attack?"

"Attack might be a more precise formulation, Captain."

"Lt. Romaine seems most susceptible. Mr Scott, perhaps you'd better go down to Sickbay after all. If she was the only one of four hundred and thirty people who passed out, we'd better find out why."

"Aye, sir," Scott said, heading for the elevators with alacrity.

"I have plotted the storm's path, Captain," Chekov said. "On its present course it will hit the Memory Alpha planetoid as it did us."

"Uhura, warn them of the proximity of the phenomenon. Can you give us an ETA for it, Chekov?"

"It's impossible, Captain. It has the ability to change speed."

"Sorry, Captain," Uhura said, "But I'm unable to establish contact with the planetoid. Am hailing on all frequencies. No response."

"It does not matter, Captain," Spock said. "Memory Alpha has no protective shields. When the library complex was assembled, shielding was regarded as inappropriate to its totally academic purpose. Since the information on the memory planet is freely available to everyone, special protection was deemed unnecessary."

"Wonderful," Kirk said sarcastically. "I hope the 'storm' is aware of that rationale."

"We're completing approach to the planetoid," Sulu said. "But the storm's gotten there first."

"Uhura, get through to—"

"I cannot," Uhura said. "I cannot get past the interference, sir."

"Mr Spock, how many people are there on Memory Alpha?"

"It varies with the number of scholars, researchers, scientists, from various Federation planets who are using the computer complex."

"Mr Chekov, maintain standard orbit."

"The storm is now leaving Memory Alpha," Sulu reported.

"And," Spock added, "the sensors give no readings of energy being generated on the planetoid."

"Any life readings?"

"None, sir."

"Check for malfunction."

Spock did so. “Sensors inoperative again.”

“We’d better find out what’s going on down there.” Kirk turned to the intercom. “Kirk to Sickbay. Is Mr Scott there?”

“Scott here. I was checking on the lass. She’s going to be fine, though. Nothing wrong with her.”

“I’m relieved to hear your prognosis. Is the doctor there with you?”

“McCoy here, Jim.”

“How’s the girl?”

“I think she’s in good shape.”

“Apparently Scotty thinks so, too. Both of you, meet me in the Transporter Room, on the double. Mr Spock, come with me. The con is yours, Mr Sulu.”

The four materialized in a computer room on Memory Alpha. The room was utterly silent, and there was no light at all.

“Somehow,” McCoy grumbled, “I find transporting into the darkness unnerving.”

“Scotty,” Kirk said, “can you give us some light in here?”

Scott checked the boards nearby; they could hear him fumbling. Then a small glow appeared, a safe-light of some sort. “This will have to do. The generator is inoperative. The alternative is to go back to the ship for hand torches.”

Spock moved to the face of the largest computer cabinet with his tricorder, but for several moments simply stood there, doing nothing. Kirk guessed he was waiting for his eyes to become dark-adapted, a gift far better developed in Vulcans than in humans. Then he lifted the tricorder.

“Damage report, Mr Spock?”

“It’s a disaster for the galaxy, Captain. The central brain damaged—all memory cores burned out. The loss might be irretrievable.”

Kirk took a step and stumbled over something large and soft. He put a hand down to it, but he too could see better now.

“Mr Spock. I’ve just encountered a body. Look around the floor.”

There was a long silence. Then Spock said: “There are dead men and creatures from other planets sprawled all around us. Move very carefully until you can see better. I’m scanning for a life reading… Yes, I have one, very faint.”

"Location, Mr Spock?"

"It is too weak to get an exact bearing, but…" He moved away.

"We'd better find him while he's still alive. We have to get more knowledge of this… enemy."

"Over here, Captain," Spock's voice called.

The other three carefully moved toward the sound of his voice. At his feet a girl, evidently a technician, was on her knees, struggling to get up. An already dead man nearby had evidently tried to help her. She was murmuring.

Spock listened intently. "The same garbled sounds," he said, "that Lt. Romaine was making when she fainted after the disturbance."

"Are you sure, Spock?"

"Absolutely sure."

Kirk flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*… Mr Sulu. Beam down Lt. Romaine immediately—and have her bring five hand torches."

"Yes, sir."

The technician's voice murmured on, but it was becoming steadily weaker. Then she pitched forward on her face.

McCoy took a reading, and then silently shook his head. Kirk said: "Can you tell what she died of?"

"Severe brain hemorrhaging due to distortion of all neural centers. Dissolution of all basic personality patterns. Even the autonomic nervous system."

"The attack, Captain, was thorough," Spock said.

"What did the others die of?"

"Each had a different brain center destroyed," McCoy said. "Just how, I can't tell you. Maybe when I get back to the ship's computer—"

The shimmer of the Transporter effect briefly illumated the charnel chamber and Mira materialized. The beam of a flashlight leapt from her hand, but Scott moved swiftly to step into it, blocking her view of the bodies.

"Mira—the Captain has some questions. Give me the rest of the torches."

"Here you are… Yes, Captain?"

Kirk said gently: "Mira, while you were unconscious you were, uh, speaking."

"What did I say?" She seemed genuinely surprised.

"We don't know. You talked in a strange language we didn't understand. We found one person barely alive in here, and she was speaking in the same way—"

"Was speaking?" Before anyone could move to prevent her, she darted around the central computer and swept the beam of her flash over the floor. When she spoke again, it was in a frightened whisper. "All dead… just like I saw them. Captain, we must get back to the ship."

"Why?"

Her hands went to her brow. She seemed unable to answer.

"Tell me why!"

"Captain—that… that… it's returning!"

"How do you know?"

"I know. You'll be killed if we stay."

"I assure you, lieutenant," Spock said, "that unexplained phenomenon was headed away from the planetoid before we came here. It is probably seeking other victims."

"I tell you, it will kill us!" Her panic was genuine, that was clear.

Kirk's communicator beeped. "Bridge to Captain Kirk. The storm has reappeared on the long-range scanner."

"I told him it is not a storm," Spock said.

"Course, Mr Sulu?"

"Coming back in this direction, and closing fast."

"Beam us up."

The minute he saw the Transporter Room coming into being around him, Kirk headed for the intercom, but Scott's voice stopped him.

"Captain, wait! We've lost Mira."

Kirk turned and saw that Lt. Romaine was indeed not there. Lt. Kyle was at the Transporter controls. Scott leaped to his side.

"Where is she? Stabilize her!"

"Something's interfering with the transporter signal," Kyle said. "I have her coordinates, but she's suspended in transit."

"Let me." Together the two men struggled with the controls. Suddenly, Kyle said, "Aha, it's cleared," and at the same moment Mira materialized on the Transporter platform. She stepped off, dazed but smiling.

"Mr Scott, Lt. Romaine, you'd best go to the emergency manual monitor and see if enough new equipment is in inventory to repair

at least some of Memory Alpha." Kirk hit the intercom. "Mr Sulu, get us out of here. Mr Spock, to the bridge, please."

In the emergency manual monitor, Mira and Scott were working side by side. The inventory had proceeded for some time in silence. Then Scott said: "When I—thought we lost you, back there in the Transporter Room—well, you're not to do that again."

"It was so frightening," she said. "I felt pulled apart."

"You almost were. There was interference with the Transporter mechanism."

"And that's more than you can say about me," she said. What she meant by this, Scott had no idea.

"I'll tell you something. You are the sanest—the smartest—the nicest—and the most beautiful woman that has ever been aboard this ship."

"And what else?"

"Anything else, I'm keeping to myself for the moment."

"But I'm so much trouble to you."

Trouble? What trouble? Of course, you could drive a man daft, but that's not what I call trouble."

She smiled. "Do I drive you daft, Scotty?"

"Well now—if it was me, you might have to work at it."

"I'd be willing—" Then, as if embarrassed, she turned away and resumed being busy.

The *Enterprise* has been my life," Scott said. "I love this ship, and I love every day I've spent on it. But, until you came aboard, I didn't know how lonely it is to be free in the galaxy… So, don't you talk of trouble." He took her in his arms. "Now I want to forget about Memory Alpha."

It was the wrong thing to say. She pushed against his chest, her hands trembling. "Scotty… before that… I saw it—exactly as it happened."

"What of it? That happens to lots of people. There's a French term for it. They think they're seeing something before it actually occurs. But actually one eye picked it up without realizing—"

"My eyes weren't playing tricks!"

He smoothed her brow. "Then I'm sure there is some other perfectly reasonable explanation that will erase that worried frown."

"But Scotty, I saw the men dead in their exact positions—before I ever left the ship."

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Listen to me. I told you in Sickbay what strange tricks a first trip in space can play on your mind. That's all it is."

"No, Scotty."

"Have you ever had visions of future events before this?"

"Never."

"And, if you ask me, *nobody* ever has," Scott said firmly. "That seeing the future is pure bunk. You know that, don't you?"

"I always believed it."

"And you're absolutely right."

"But what is it, Scotty? What is frightening me? Ever since we've been near that—that storm, I've had such strange thoughts… feelings of such terror."

"Space, space, space, that's all it is."

"Then I don't have to report it?"

"If you want to spend the trip in Sickbay," Scott said. "But what good would it do? McCoy can no more cure it than he can cure a cold. It'll pass."

"When I get my permanent assignment… I hope it will be to the *Enterprise*"

"You just better make sure of it."

"Captain," Sulu said. "It's changing course."

"Plot it, Mr Chekov."

"Present course will bring it across our starboard bow."

"Mr Spock, you made a statement that that phenomenon was not a storm."

"Yes, Captain. No known conditions in space would support it as a natural phenomenon. But the sensors seem to be in working order at the moment. Perhaps this time the elusive creature will reveal something about itself." He bent into his hooded viewer. "It seems to be maintaining its distance, but matching course with us. I am receiving increasing magnitudes of energy. Yes—undoubtedly a life form. Fascinating!"

"Control your fascination, Mr Spock. Pragmatically, what are the implications?"

"We saw the results of full contact in the deaths on Memory Alpha. The humanoid neurological system is destroyed when fully exposed to these peculiar wave patterns."

"But what *is* it, Spock?"

"Not what is it, sir. What are they. There are ten distinct life units within it, Captain. They are powerfully alive and vital."

"Who are they? Where are they from?"

"Impossible to determine without programming for computer analysis."

"Not now." Kirk shot a glance at the main viewer. "It's clear we can't outrun them. Can we shield against them?"

"I do not think so, sir."

"There must be some defensive action we can take."

"Captain, it is a community of life units. Their attack is in the form of brain waves directed against the brain that is most compatible."

"A living brain!" Kirk said. "Perhaps we can avoid a next time. Lt. Uhura, open all channels and tie in the universal translator. Maybe I can talk to them."

Uhura got to work. Indicators began to light up. "All channels open," she said finally. "Translator tied in."

Kirk looked up at the form of lights on the viewer. Incongruously, he felt wryly amused at the notion of trying to talk to an electrical cloud. "This is Captain James Kirk of the USS *Enterprise.* We wish you no harm. Physical contact between us is fatal to our life form. Please do not come any closer to this ship."

There was no response; only a faint wash of static. Spock said, "Perhaps it did not understand."

"Captain, change in velocity recorded," Sulu said. "It has accelerated its approach."

"Perhaps it will understand another language," Kirk said, beginning to feel angry. "Condition Red Alert. Prepare for phaser firing."

The Red Alert began flashing, and the distant alarm echoed throughout the ship.

"Mr Sulu, lock in phasers for firing across their course. Do not hit them."

"Locked in, sir."

"Fire."

The phaser shot lanced to one side of the lights and on off into deep space.

"Reaction, Mr Sulu?"

"None, sir. They are still approaching."

Apparently a shot across the bow was insufficiently convincing. "Lock to target."

"Locked on, sir."

"Fire."

The shot seemed to score a direct hit. The community of life units dispersed in apparent confusion, and then began to reform. So they *could* be hurt—

"Captain, Captain," Scott's voice shouted from the intercom, without even waiting for an acknowledgment. "Scott here. The phaser shots—they're killing Mira."

"Killing Lt. Romaine?; How—"

"When you fired, she was stunned, she crumpled. Another shot and you'll kill her."

"Get her to Sickbay at once… Mr Spock, we appear to be at an impasse. Any suggestions?"

"Only one, Captain," the Science Officer said. "There seems to be only one possible defense. If we can find an environment that is deadly to the life form—and at the same time, isolate the girl from the deadly effects of it—"

"It sounds like asking the impossible." Kirk turned to the intercom. "Kirk to Dr McCoy… Bones, is Lt. Romaine well enough to be talked to?"

"I think so," McCoy's voice said. "I can have her ready in a few minutes."

"Bring her and Mr Scott to the Briefing Room as soon as possible. Bring all available biographical data on the lieutenant… Mr Spock, come with me."

In the Briefing Room, Spock went immediately to his slave console; Kirk sat at the center of the table, McCoy next to him.

"Go easy on her, Jim. She's in a bad state."

"I'll try. But this can't be postponed."

"I know. I was pretty hard on her myself the first time this happened. I needn't have been. We might know more."

"I'll be careful."

The door opened to admit Scott and Mira. He was holding her by the arm. She seemed pale and distraught. After she was seated, Scott went to his chair at the opposite end of the table.

Kirk leaned toward her and said gently: This is not a trial, Lt. Romaine. You are not being accused of anything."

"I know," Mira said, almost in a whisper. She glanced toward McCoy. "I didn't mean to be uncooperative, Doctor."

"Of course you didn't," McCoy said. "I told the Captain that."

"I'll tell you everything I know. I trust all of you implicitly. I want to help."

"Good," Kirk said. This investigation is prompted by two events that may be connected. The first time was when you passed out on the bridge. The second is when we fired the ship's phasers into the force that is attacking us, and we seriously injured you."

"It wasn't serious, Captain. You mustn't worry about hurting me."

"We're glad we didn't. Nevertheless, we won't take that particular defense measure again. Now, this is how we will proceed. Spock will provide everything we know about our attackers. Dr McCoy has access to Starfleet's exhaustive file on you. A comparison of the two may turn up some unsuspected connection that will protect you—and ourselves. All right, gentlemen? Dr McCoy, you begin. Does Lt. Romaine have any history of psychosomatic illness?"

"Occasional and routine teen-age incidence."

"Any evidence of any involuntary or unconscious telepathatic abilities?"

"None."

"Any pathological or unusual empathic responses?"

"No, Captain. Not empathic. However, an exceptionally flexible and pliant response to new learning situations."

At this Spock leaned forward, but made no comment.

"There's one other thing, Captain," McCoy said. "Right after our phasers hit that thing, I gave Lt. Romaine the Steinman Standard Analysis. I don't have the results here but Nurse Chapel is having it sent down. In the meantime, I see nothing else very illuminating in the psychological file. Lt. Romaine has developed strong defenses to guard against her extreme competitiveness. Marked scientific and mathematical abilities set up an early competition with her distinguished father. It appears that the problem is still not completely resolved."

"That's not true," Mira said, tears coming to her eyes. "It was over long ago. I'm not like that—not any more."

"Everybody's record has much worse comments from the psychology majors," Kirk said. "Luckily for us, nobody ever reads ours. Pretend you didn't hear. Mr Spock, any functional and motivating data on the life force?"

"I have asked the computer why these beings pursue the *Enterprise.* The first answer was 'Completion.' When I requested an alternate formulation, it gave me 'Fulfillment' instead. I find both responses unclear, but the machine has insufficient data to give us anything better, thus far."

The door opened and a yeoman entered with a cartridge which he handed to McCoy. The surgeon inserted it into his viewer. Almost at once, he cast a disturbed look at Mira.

"What is it, Doctor?"

"A comparison of our Steinman with Starfleet records shows that Lt. Romaine's fingerprints, voice analysis, retinal patterns, all external factors are the same as before. But according to the two encephalograms, her brain wave pattern has been altered."

"Isn't that impossible?" Kirk asked.

"That's what I was taught. The BCP is as consistent as fingerprints."

"Let's see it."

McCoy put the tape deck into the slot on the desk, and the tri-screen lit up. They all looked at it for a moment. Then Spock said, "Doctor, I believe that's the wrong slide."

"No it isn't, Spock. It's from tape deck D—brain circuitry pattern of Lt. Mira Romaine."

"No, Doctor. It happens to be tape deck H—the impulse tracking we obtained on the alien life units."

"Nurse Chapel followed this every step of the way. There can't be an error."

Mira was staring in tense horror at the screen.

"According to your records, Dr McCoy," Spock said, "Lt. Romaine did not show abnormal telepathatic abil-ity."

"That's right, Spock. Exceptional pliancy *was* indicated. It might be a factor."

"It must be. There is an identity of pattern between these alien life forms and the mind of Lt. Romaine. Their thoughts are becoming her thoughts."

Scott said: "Mira's tried to tell me all along that she was seeing things happen in advance—"

"Why didn't you report it?" Kirk said.

"You don't report space sickness. That's all I ever thought it was."

"What else did she see?"

Scott thought a moment. "The first attack on the ship… the attack on Memory Alpha… and—the time we almost lost her."

"Those were all acts carried out by our attacker. Anything else?"

Scott got up and went over to Mira, who was still staring at the screen. "I thought there was another time. I guess I was wrong."

"Was he wrong, Lieutenant?" Kirk said.

Mira finally looked up at Scotty, who sank to one knee beside her. In a trancelike voice, she said, "Yes. There was one other time."

"What did you see?"

"I saw Scotty," she said, still looking at him intently,

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"What was he doing?"

"He was dying." Her hand went to Scott's face. "Now I understand what's been happening. I've been seeing through another mind. I have been flooded by thoughts that are not my own… by desires and drives that control me—" Suddenly she broke completely and was in Scott's arms. "Scotty—I would rather die than hurt you. I would rather die!"

"What's all this talk of dying?" Scott demanded. "They've called the turn on us three out of four times. That's a better average than anybody deserves. It's our turn now. Well fight them. So let's not hear anything more about dying."

It was a bold speech, but Kirk could think of no way that the *Enterprise* could back it up. He punched the intercom. "Ensign Chekov, what success have you had with the evasive tactics?"

"Useless, sir. They'll probably be through the shields again in a minute or so."

Kirk turned to Mira. "They may destroy you and us as they did Memory Alpha. You are especially susceptible to their will. There is one way we might survive. Do not resist. Let them begin to function through you. If we can control that moment, we have a chance. Will you try?"

"Tell me what to do," she said, her voice shaky.

"Everybody down to the antigrav test unit. Follow me."

"Attention all personnel!" Sulu's voice barked from the intercom. "Clear all decks! Alien being has penetrated ship!"

The door to the gravity chamber opened off the interior of the medical lab. As the group from the Briefing Room entered at a run, Kirk said, "As soon as she enters the chamber, secure all ports."

But as Mira started for the chamber, the swirling colors of the life force pervaded the lab. She stopped and spun around, her hand going to her brow, her eyes blazing, her face contorted with struggle. Scott started toward her.

"Don't touch me!" It was a piercing scream. "Scotty—stay away __"

The multicolored flashes slowly and finally were gone, leaving Mira standing as if frozen. Then her lips parted, and from them came once more the sound of the unknown language.

"We've lost her to them," Scott said desperately, starting toward her once more.

"Stay where you are!" Kirk said.

McCoy added, "She could kill us all in this state."

"She will," Spock said, "unless we are able to complete what the Captain is planning."

Scott was looking at Mira in agony. "Stay with us, Mira. Stay with us, Mira Romaine!"

"I am trying," she said. It was her own voice, but coming out in smothered gasps. "I want to be… with you… They are too strong."

"Fight them now, Mira," Kirk said. "Don't lose yourself to them. Hold on."

The girl sank against the door to the gravity chamber. Her eyes closed, her body became taut with the effort at control.

"I am Mira Romaine," she said, and this time her voice was angry. "I will be who I choose to be. Let me go!"

But the struggle was too much for her. Her body went limp, and her eyes opened, inexpressibly sad. In a voice like a lost soul, utterly unlike anything she had ever sounded before, she said: "She cannot prevent us. You cannot stop us."

Scott lunged forward, but Kirk grabbed him. "Mira! Mira!"

"That's not Mira talking," McCoy said.

"Captain, we must deal with them directly," Spock said. "Now, while she retains partial identity, we can speak to them. Her voice will answer for them."

"I am the commander of this vessel," Kirk said to the entranced girl. "Do you understand me?"

"We understand you. We have searched for a millennium to find the One through whom we can see and hear and speak and live out our lives."

"Who are you?"

"We are of Zetar."

"All humanoid life on Zetar," Spock said, "was destroyed long ago."

"Yes. All corporeal life was destroyed."

"Then what are you?" Kirk demanded.

"The desires, the hopes, the thoughts and the will" of the last hundred from Zetar. The force of life in us could not be wiped out."

"All things die."

"At the proper time. Our planet was dying. We were determined to live on. At the peak of our plans to go elsewhere, a sudden final disaster struck us down. But the force of our lives survived. And now at last we have found the One through whom we can live it out."

"The body you inhabit has its own life to lead."

"She will accept ours."

"She does not wish it. She is fighting to retain her own identity."

"Her mind will accept our thoughts. Our lives will be fulfilled."

"Will she learn like the people on Memory Alpha learned?"

"We did not wish to kill."

"You did kill!"

"No! Resisting us killed those on Memory Alpha. We did not kill. We wanted only the technician, but she fought back."

"The price of your survival is too high."

"We wish only the girl."

"You cannot have her," Kirk said fiercely. "You are entitled to your own lives. But you cannot have another's!"

Mira herself seemed to hear this, and her eyes to respond. When she spoke again, the voice was her own. "Life was given to *me.* It is mine. I will live it out… I will…"

Her voice weakened, and she sank back. McCoy took a tricorder reading. "The girl's life reading is becoming a match to the—Zetarians," he said. "She is losing."

"Do not fight us."

"They will not accept their own deaths," Spock said.

"They will be forced to accept it," Kirk said.

"You will all die," said the Mira/Zetar voice.

"Captain," Spock said, "unless we can complete the plan at once, they will carry out their threat."

McCoy said, "Jim, you realize that the pressure you need to kill the Zetarians might kill her, too?"

"At least, our way she has a chance. We must get her into the antigrav chamber."

They all moved in about her, in a close circle. Scott forced himself to the front and said, "Mira will not kill me."

He stooped and quickly picked her up in his arms. He faced the opening to the gravity chamber, and his head snapped back, his face contorted in agony. Nevertheless he got her into the chamber, and the doors closed behind her. Then he crumpled to the floor. His face now, however, was relaxed. As McCoy bent over him, his eyes opened.

"I knew she wouldn't kill me," he said, with a faint smile.

Kirk and Spock went to the chamber's console, joined after a moment by McCoy. After a sweeping glance, Kirk then crossed to the bull's-eye port which gave visual access to the chamber.

"Neutralize gravity, Mr Spock."

Mira's body lay on the floor of the chamber where Scott had put it for what seemed to be a long time. Then she moved feebly, and the motion set her to drifting weightlessly.

"The Zetarians are growing stronger," McCoy said. "The weightless state is their natural condition, after all."

"Begin pressurizing," Kirk said. "Bring it up to two atmospheres."

Spock turned a rheostat slowly. There seemed to be no change in Mira. Theoretically, there should begin to be some sort of feedback system going into operation between Mira's nervous system, as it responded to pressures on her body not natural to her, and the occupying wave patterns of the Zetarian brain; but no such effect was evident yet.

"Two atmospheres, Captain."

"Increase at the rate of one atmosphere a minute."

"Wait a minute, Jim," McCoy said. "Not even a deep-sea diver experiences pressure increases at that rate. They take it slowly, a few atmospheres at a time."

"That's just what I'm counting on, Bones. If it's something Mira can adapt to, there'll be no adverse effect on her, and hence none on them. Run it up as ordered, Mr Spock."

His hands darting, Spock tied the pressure rheostat into circuit with a timer. "Rising now as ordered, Captain."

A quick glance at the big bourdon gauge showed this. Kirk glued his face back to the glass.

Still nothing seemed to be happening, except that Mira's head was now lolling from side to side.

"Jim, you're going to kill her at this rate!"

Kirk did not respond. The chamber was beginning to look hazy, as though water were beginning to condense out of the atmosphere inside it—but that couldn't be, because water vapor didn't condense except to a *decrease* in pressure—

The fogginess increased, and became luminescent. In a moment more, the chamber was pulsating with the multiple lights of the Zetar life force. It grew brighter and brighter for several seconds.

"Jim, you can't—"

Kirk silenced the surgeon with a savage gesture. Almost at the same moment, the lights vanished, and with them the fog.

"Cut, Spock!"

There was the snap of a toggle. Mira's eyes were now open. She looked entirely normal, though a little bewildered at finding herself floating in midair. Scott snatched up the microphone which fed the intercom in the tank.

"Don't move, Mira! It's going to be all right! They're gone—they're gone!"

Kirk turned away and gestured to McCoy to take over.

"Reduce pressure very *very* gradually, Mr Spock," the surgeon said.

"It will tax Mr Scott's patience, Doctor."

"We have all the time in the world, now," Scott said, his eyes glowing.

"Precisely," McCoy said. "And after all this, we don't want to lose the subject to a simple case of the bends. Lieutenant, lie perfectly still; you're in free fall and the slightest movement may bounce you off the chamber walls—and I don't want even the slightest bruise. Don't move at all, just take deep regular breaths… that's

it… Mr Spock, restore gravity very gradually. I want her to ground without even a jar… Mira, don't hold your breath. Breathe deeply and continuously… That's it—in, out, in, out, keep it steady… Fine. You won't be out of there for another two hours, so you might as well relax. The battle's over, anyhow."

There was a deep sigh all around. Perhaps Mira had given up holding her breath, but it was evident that she had not been alone.

"Spock," Kirk said, "is it possible for you to judge the long-range mental effects on the Lieutenant?"

"I am not an expert, Captain, and bear in mind that Lt. Romaine's mind was invaded by something quite inhuman. However, despite Starfleet's judgment of her pliancy, she put up a valiant struggle to retain her identity. I would propose that that augurs well."

"Spock is right, Jim," McCoy said, to Kirk's surprise. "While the truth was hard for her to take, when it was brought out, the girl reacted well. The struggle she put up in this experience, I would say, will strengthen her whole ego structure."

"Would either of you credit Scotty's steadfast belief in her as a factor?"

Spock's eyebrow arched suspiciously. "You mean 'love' as a motivation? Humans claim a great deal for that particular emotion. It is possible, but—"

"No 'buts' at all," McCoy said. "It was a deciding factor—and will be, in the girl's recovery."

"Then, do I understand you both agree that Lt. Romaine need not return to Starbase for further treatment?"

"I would say," Spock said, "that work is the better therapy."

"Absolutely, Jim."

"Scotty, unsmash your nose from that port and give us a sober opinion. How is Lt. Romaine now?"

"Beautiful, Captain."

"Ready to return to work?"

"Positively, Captain."

There was an exchange of grins all around. Then Kirk turned to the intercom. "Kirk to bridge."

"Sulu here, Captain."

"Set course for Memory Alpha. Lt. Romaine has lots of work to do there."

THE CLOUD MINDERS

(Margaret Armen, David Gerrold and Oliver Crawford)

"Then there's been a mistake," Kirk said.

And he couldn't afford one, not on this mission. During a routine check of *the Enterprise's* operational quadrant of the galaxy, they had been ordered by the Federation to make top warp speed to the planet Ardana, sole source of a trace metal able to arrest a botanical plague ravaging vegetation which made a neighboring planet habitable. It was a mission whose emergency nature was known to the High Advisor of Ardana. Yet his greeting to the *Enterprise* had contained no reference to the zenite mines. Instead, his welcome specified Stratos as the reception site.

"Stratos is their Cloud City, isn't it, Mr Spock?"

"It is, Captain."

Kirk hit the intercom to the Transporter Room. "Mr Scott, are you locked in on the mines of Ardana or its Cloud City?"

"The mines, Captain. That's what you ordered."

Then this mistake isn't ours, Kirk thought. The Ardanans understood the Transporter; they had it themselves. Turning to Uhura, he said tersely, 'Tell the High Advisor we request that the official welcoming courtesies be dispensed with. We are beaming down directly to the mines to ensure the fastest possible transport of the zenite to Marak II. The need is desperate. Say we appreciate the honor and look forward to a visit to Cloud City in the future… Come with me, Mr Spock."

But no miners were awaiting them at the mine-shaft entrance. The hill by which they'd arrived was deserted.

"I don't understand it," Kirk said. "The Troglyte miners were to make delivery when we beamed down."

"Perhaps there is another entrance," Spock suggested.

There was none. The other side of the hill was as abandoned, as bleak and forbidding as the rest of their arrival area. It was Spock who put the thought in both of their minds into words. "It would

seem that the Troglytes have changed their minds about the delivery, sir."

Even as Kirk nodded there came a hiss in the air above their heads. Two heavy, noosed thongs were hurled from behind them with an accuracy that pinned their arms helplessly to their bodies. Jerks tightened the thongs, and the two *Enterprise* officers were pulled roughly around to confront four creatures, obvious Troglytes, their loose miners' overalls begrimed, their eyes begoggled, their features hidden by slitted masks. One of the Troglytes was slightly smaller than the others; but they all had long, sharp-edged mortae, the honed blades aimed in open threat.

"What is the reason for this attack?" Kirk demanded.

"Interference breeds attack," the smallest Troglyte said coldly, in a female voice. "My name is Vanna, Captain. I have need of your… services. Move on." The overalled arm motioned to the mine-shaft entrance.

"We are here by permission of your government Council," Kirk said. "On emergency mission."

"Move on, Captain." Ominous ice entered the voice.

Kirk felt the prod of her sharp blade in his back. Exchanging a swift glance with Spock, they burst into simultaneous action, lashing out with their feet at the two nearest Troglytes. Spock's kick caught his man in the chest. It felled him just as Kirk's foot, slamming into his captor's stomach, dropped him to the ground, knocking the wind out of him.

Vanna lunged at Kirk, but he had broken clear of his bonds and knocked her weapon out of her hand. Spock and the remaining Troglyte circled each other warily. Vanna, agile and swift, lunged at Kirk with her bare hands and they fell to the ground. In the struggle,, the strap securing her goggles snapped. They slipped from her face to reveal feminine features of such surprising beauty that Kirk, lost in amazement, had no eyes for what was materializing on the Transporter coordinates.

It was her wince at the sudden glare of sunlight that brought him out of his trance. A man of patrician bearing stood behind them. He wore a togalike garment and the charismatic air of the born ruler. Two husky males, armed and uniformed in gleaming white, shimmered into sight beside him—guards.

The patrician spoke. "Troglytes! Halt!"

He was not obeyed. Vanna, unyielding, continued to writhe in Kirk's grasp. Spock was now trying to cope with two of the miners,

as the third elbowed groggily from the ground where the Vulcan's first kick had landed him.

"Surrender—or we'll fire!"

Wrenching an arm free, Vanna tried to rake Kirk's face with her nails. He pulled back slightly, and seizing her chance to break his hold, she leaped to her feet and ran to the mine entrance, shouting to her companions. They joined her, racing after her amid a shower of shining pellets. One of the missiles from the guards' guns struck. Zigzagging, hunkered low, the three unwounded Troglytes disappeared into the mine entrance.

Kirk, climbing slowly to his feet, was frowning in preoccupation, his eyes following Vanna and her vanished companions. Spock stooped to retrieve the communicator which had dropped from his belt, and straightened to meet the approach of their rescuers.

"Are you harmed, gentlemen?" asked the toga-clad man.

"Just a little shaken up," Kirk said.

"I am Plasus, High Advisor for the planet Council."

Kirk acknowledged the introduction briefly. "Captain Kirk, *Enterprise.* My First Officer, Mr Spock."

"My regrets for the unpleasantness of your welcome to Ardana, gentlemen."

"It was rather warm," Kirk said dryly.

"Unfortunately, violence is habitual with the Troglytes. I can assure you, Captain, this insult will not go unpunished."

It was Spock's turn to frown in thought as Kirk said, "I am more concerned with that zenite consignment. Why isn't it in its specified location?"

Urbane, unruffled, the High Advisor's face with its high-bridged nose assumed a look of sadness. "Apparently the Disruptors have confiscated it, as I feared they would. They're a small group of Troglyte malcontents who hold the others under complete domination. It is the Disruptors who are responsible for the others' refusal to continue mining zenite."

"But they agreed to this delivery," Kirk protested. "It was your Council which assured us of that."

Plasus nodded benignly. "Obviously," he said, "they agreed as a ruse to get valuable hostages."

"Hostages? For what purpose?'

"To force the Council to meet their demands." Plasus turned to his guards. "Pick up the injured Troglyte for later questioning… Then organize a search party for the zenite consignment." Once

more the urbane host, he said to Kirk, "Meanwhile, Captain, I suggest that you and First Officer Spock be our guests in Stratos City."

"I hope the search will be brief," Kirk said.

A shadow of grimness darkened the urbanity for a fleeting second. "I assure you we will do everything in our power to make it so. Now if you will just step this way, over here, our own Transporter will pick us all up."

They were led into a large, oddly designed chamber. Its floor and three of its walls glittered with a subdued iridescence. The fourth wall had been left open to the expanse of sky beyond, its border a waist-high balustrade of the same iridescent material. There was a careful carelessness about the manner in which luxuriously cushioned benches were scattered about the room, a calculated casualness that matched the surrealistic sculptural forms which decorated it. Central to it was a small dais, flanked by two straggly carved poles of almost ceiling height. They struck Kirk as purposeless even as decoration.

From the balustrade, Spock called, "Captain, here, sir, please!"

The whole planet was spread out beneath them. Its surface could be only half seen through drifting mists. What was visible was dwarfed by distance to the dimensions of a relief map, its hills anonymous mounds, its valleys vague shadows. There was both beauty and terror in such eminence. It evoked a feeling of uneasiness in Kirk.

"Remarkable," Spock said. "The finest example of sustained antigravity elevation I have ever seen."

The sound of a door opening behind them made them turn. A young woman had entered the room of antigravity triumph. She was tall, willow-slim, willow-graceful, her golden hair a mist of mystery around her perfect face. She didn't walk—she glided, her approaching movement so.supple it lacked all suggestion of bone or skeletal muscle. Like the clouds which obscured the planet's contours, she drifted toward the two *Enterprise* officers.

"My father," she said to Plasus, "your sentinels informed me of our honored guests' arrival. I came to extend my greetings."

"Gentlemen, my daughter—one of our planet's incomparable works of art. Droxine, Captain James Kirk and his First Officer, Mr Spock."

Her eyes lingered for a moment on the satyr ears of the First Officer. "I have never met a Vulcan before, sir," she said demurely.

Spock bowed. "Nor I a work of art, madame."

Kirk looked at Spock with quizzical amusement and surprise. Plasus beckoned his guests back into the room from the balcony. "Come, gentlemen, there is much to see in our city. This is our Council gallery. We have some of our finest art forms assembled here for the viewing of all our city dwellers. That piece there can boast of a special—"

He stopped abruptly. The piece he had turned to was a transparent solid of flowing serpentine lines curled like coiling flames. A miner's mortae had been driven into it, webbing it with cracks.

"Disruptors again!" Furiously, Plasus jerked the tool from the sculpture and dashed it to the floor.

"They are despoiling the whole city," Droxine said.

"For what purpose?" Spock asked.

"Again, to force the Council to accede to their demands." Plasus spoke with the impatience of an adult irritated by a half-witted child.

"Just what are these demands?" Kirk said.

"Nothing you need concern yourself about, Captain."

Kirk's voice was very quiet. "I must concern myself with anything that interferes with the delivery of the zenite, Mr Advisor."

"Mr Advisor, plant life is the source of oxygen," Spock added. "If all plant life is destroyed on Marak II, all humanoid and animal life will end there with it."

Plasus had recovered his suavity. "I assure you, gentlemen, you will get what you came for."

"I hope so," Kirk said. He paused. "Ardana is a member of the Federation. It is your Council's responsibility that nothing interferes with its obligation to another Federation member."

"And we accept the responsibility."

Spock touched the webbed cracks in the sculpture. "But why destroy art forms? They are a loss to everybody."

"Art means nothing to the Disruptors." Plasus stooped to pick up the mortae. "*This* is the only form they understand." Rage overpowered him again. Nobody spoke as he fought to regain control of himself. "But no doubt you would like to rest. A chamber has been prepared for you. Sentinels will conduct you to it, gentlemen."

It was dismissal. Droxine's eyes followed Spock as the two from the *Enterprise* left the room.

"The Disruptors must be mad," she said, "to have attacked two such charming strangers."

"They grow more daring every day," Plasus said.

"Do you think the Captain and his very attractive officer will feel we are responsible?"

Plasus smiled indulgently down on his daughter. "Responsible for injuries done to the charming strangers—or to our diplomatic ties?"

Droxine flushed. "Oh, I was concerned about both, father."

Plasus laughed outright. "I am sure they will not blame you."

She exhaled a breath of relief. "I'm glad. I like, them. They are not at all like our men of Ardana… Father, promise me not to find the zenite too soon?"

Before he could reply, two guards burst into the ; room. Between them was a powerful man, his muscular shoulders tensed against their grip, but not struggling to free himself. That he had been doing so before was evident in the guards' panting.

"Apologies, Mr Advisor," said one of them. "This Troglyte was apprehended leaving the city. As he lacks a transport card, we thought you would want to question him."

The man's aspect bore little resemblance to the stunted figures of other Troglytes. Despite the grime of his miner's overalls, the unkempt tangle of his shoulder-length hair, he was handsome. Proudly he drew himself to his full height, his eyes bright with scorn as they fixed on Plasus.

"What is your business in Stratos City, Troglyte?" demanded the High Advisor.

Though the flashing eyes burned with hate, the lips were silent.

"Speak! I command you!"

"My business is to repair," said the prisoner.

"Indeed. Then you must have a repair order. Where is it?"

"It was forgotten."

"Did you also forget your transport card?" The question was harsh with irony.

"It was lost when your sentinels attacked me."

"And where was your cavern mortae lost?" Plasus pointed to the empty sheath at the waist of the overalls. Then, striding to the

mutilated sculpture, he plunged the mortae he still held in his hand into the hole it had made. "Here, perhaps."

"I came to make repairs," the prisoner said stubbornly.

"You shall make them—by telling me the names of the Disruptors."

"I know nothing."

"I would advise you to increase your knowledge."

An open sneer distorted the handsome face. "That is not possible for a Troglyte. The Stratos City dwellers have said so."

"Secure him to the dais," Plasus told the guards.

They tried to. But as they pushed the miner toward the dais, he knocked one guard aside and raced for the iridescent balustrade. The guards moved for their guns, but Plasus shouted, "*No!* I want him alive!"

It was too late. The prisoner had flung himself over the balustrade.

After a moment, Plasus shrugged. "How unfortunate," he said philosophically. "How unfortunate." He went out.

Droxine, as composed as her father, had been busying herself with an arrangement of goblets on a cubical table. The gold metal of one rang as she set it down, and a moment later, Spock came through the still open doors of the Council chamber.

"Mr Spock!" the girl cried. "I thought you had accompanied Captain Kirk to the rest chamber down the corridor."

"There was some disturbance," the First Officer . said. "It awakened me."

"I was but setting the table. I did not realize I would disturb you."

"Only Vulcan ears would find such a noise discernible from such a distance," Spock said.

The perfect eyelids lifted. "It seems Vulcans are fascinatingly different," said their owner. "In many ways."

Their eyes met. "The same may be said of inhabitants of Stratos," Spock observed.

"Vulcan eyes seem to be very discerning, too." She drew him down on the bench beside her.

His attention was sufficiently on this Ardanan work of art for him to fail his reputation for discerning sight for once. Behind him, a small figure draped in the clothing of Stratos crept from behind a pillar and moved stealthily down the corridor.

In the rest chamber, Kirk, breathing evenly, lay apparently asleep on a wide, billowy-pillowed dais. Vanna, crossing to him silently, drew a mortae from under her gown and laid its blade against his throat.

Kirk opened his eyes and he seized Vanna's wrist. Twisting the mortae from her grasp, he fell back with her on the bed. She kicked and writhed, but shortly he got her arms pinned back above her head.

"Well, that's better," he said, breathing evenly. "You again!" The face beneath his chest was lovelier than he remembered; but its eyes were cold as death.

"You sleep lightly, Captain," Vanna said.

"And I see you've changed your dressmaker."

"Release me," she said tonelessly.

"So you can attack me again?"

"Then call the guards," she told him contemptuously. "They will protect you."

"But I don't want protection. I find this very enjoyable."

"I do not."

Kirk grinned down at her. "All right, I'll make a bargain with you. Answer some questions, and I'll let you up."

"What questions?"

Kirk shook his head. "First, your word."

Hesitation came and went in her face. "I will answer."

Kirk released her. Panther-swift, she leaped to her feet and stooped for the mortae beside the bed. As he gripped her wrist again, he became aware that Spock's bed was empty. Where *was* Spock in this place of sudden treacheries? With that gliding girl?

The gliding girl was leaning back against a down cushion, its cream less creamy than the skin of her face. Spock, sitting very erect, was saying, "Yes, we Vulcans pride ourselves on our logic."

"Also on complete control of your emotions?"

"Emotions interfere with logic," he said firmly.

"Is that why you take mates only once in seven years?"

"The seven-year cycle is biological. At that time the mating drive outweighs all other motivation."

Droxine moved her head from the pillow and rested it against his shoulder. He looked down at the spindrift of golden hair, its fragrance in his nostrils, and their eyes locked. "Can nothing disturb the cycle, Mr Spock?"

The Vulcan logician cleared his throat. "Exceptional feminine beauty is always disturbing, madame."

She had lifted her mouth toward his when a clang resounded from down the corridor. Spock sprang from the bench and ran for the door. Rushing into the rest chamber, he stopped dead at the sight of Vanna. Kirk had wrenched the mortae from her once more and dashed it to the floor.

"Captain, are you all right?"

From behind him Droxine cried, "*Vanna!* Why have you come here?"

Disheveled but still proud in her disarray, the Troglyte girl bent in a low bow to Kirk and Spock. "To welcome our honored guests," she said in a voice that cut with sarcasm. "Just as I was taught to do when I served in your father's household."

"It seems the Troglytes have the impression that our ship is here to intimidate them," Kirk told Spock.

"It is not an impression, Captain," Vanna said hotly. "It is truth!"

Kirk picked up her mortae and shoved it into his belt. "We are here to get that consignment of zenite. Nothing more."

"Starships do not transport cargo!" Vanna cried.

"In times of emergency they do anything," Kirk said. "And believe me, this plant plague on Marak II is an extreme emergency."

"Lies will not keep the Troglytes in their caverns, and neither will your ship, Captain."

Droxine said, "You speak like a Disruptor, Vanna."

"I speak for my people! They have as much right to the skies as you Stratos dwellers!"

"What would Troglytes do here?" asked Droxine disdainfully.

"Live! With warmth and light as everyone should!"

"Your caverns are warm," said Droxine coldly. "And your eyes are unaccustomed to light. Just as your minds are unaccustomed to reason." She moved to a wall and pressed a button. A sentinel appeared at the door; and waving a casual hand toward Vanna, Droxine said, "Take her away."

Kirk looked at Spock. "Surely," he said to Droxine, "you don't deny light and warmth to the Troglytes?"

"The Troglytes are workers," said the child of the High Advisor. "They mind zenite and till the soil. Those things can't be done here."

"In other words," Spock said, "they perform all the physical toil necessary to maintain Stratos?"

Droxine smiled at him. "That is their function in our society."

"Yet they are not allowed to share its advantages?"

"How can they share what they don't understand?"

"They could be taught to understand," Kirk said.

Droxine's answer had the sound of a lesson learned by rote. "The complete separation of toil and leisure has given Ardana a perfectly balanced social system."

Kirk was finding this conversation increasingly disturbing. He began to pace. Spock said, " 'Troglyte' is a corruption of an ancient Earth term, Captain. Its technical translation is 'cave dweller.' "

Kirk threw him a tight nod. "We should have realized—"

He was interrupted by a shriek of agony echoing from the Council gallery. He and Spock exchanged a glance of alarm and raced down the corridor to the room of luxuriously cushioned benches.

Tied tightly to its central dais, Vanna was screaming. Incandescing rays from its flanking poles flooded her face with green fire. She shrieked again.

Droxine went back to the cubical table and straightened a gold goblet, while Plasus watched. Kirk and Spock sprang to the dais to tear at the cords that bound Vanna's writhings.

"Stop it!" Kirk shouted at Plasus. There was a long moment. Then Plasus' hands came together in a faint clap. The rays faded. Still bound, Vanna slumped into unconsciousness.

"She is stubborn," Plasus said. "Physical discomfort is the only persuasion they understand, Captain."

"You have tortured her." Kirk's voice shook with anger.

"Is it preferable to spare Vanna—and allow an entire planet to be destroyed? You yourself pointed out that the search for your zenite must be short" Plasus' voice was eminently reasonable.

Spock approached Droxine. "Violence in reality is quite different from theory. Do you not agree, madame?"

"But nothing else moves the Troglytes. What else can they understand?"

"All those little things you and I understand," the Vulcan said gravely. "Such as kindness, justice, equality."

She shivered slightly. Then she drew a fold of her gown around her, rose gracefully and left the gallery.

"The abstract concepts of an intellectual society are beyond the comprehension of the Troglytes, Mr Spock." The High Advisor was angry now.

"The abstract concept of loyalty seems dear to Vanna," Kirk said.

"A few Troglytes are brought here as retainers. Vanna was one of them. They receive more training than the others."

"But obviously no more consideration," Kirk said.

Open rage thickened Plasus' voice. "I fail to see the use of this continued criticism." He beckoned to his guards and pointed to the slumped body on the dais. "Revive her!"

Kirk leaped to the dais. "The only way you'll use that device again is on both of us!"

"An imposing display of primitive gallantry. Captain. You realize, of course, that I can have my guards remove you."

"Of course," Kirk said. "But Starfleet Command seldom takes kindly to having either rays or physical force used on one of its personnel. Think twice."

Plasus did so. "Why are you so concerned about this Disruptor's well-being, Captain Kirk?"

"I want that zenite."

"Then stop interfering—and I'll get it for you. We will get it for you in our own way. Guards, take the prisoner to confinement quarters. As for you, Captain, you will return to your starship at once—or I shall contact your Starfleet Command myself to report your interference in this planet's society, in contravention of your prime directive. Should you reappear on Stratos City again, it would be only as an enemy."

The guards were removing Vanna's unconscious body from the dais. Kirk clicked open his communicator.

"Kirk to *Enterprise?*

"Scott here, Captain."

"Returning to ship. Beam us up, Mr Scott."

The Council gallery disappeared in dazzle.

Twelve hours.

Kirk moved restlessly in his command chair. The decision that confronted him was no joke. Twelve hours—and all plant life on Marak II would be irreversibly on its way to becoming extinct. Seven hundred and twenty minutes to allow the plague to complete its lethal work—or to persuade Ardana to make good on its pledge of the zenite consignment.

He swung his chair around to Uhura. "Advise Starfleet Command that the methods being employed by the government of Ardana will not make the zenite available. It is my view that I have only one alternative. I hereby notify that I must try to reason directly with the Troglyte miners. I am assuming full responsibility for these direct negotiations."

McCoy walked over to him and laid a hand on Kirk's shoulder. That won't be easy, Jim. Ardana has supplied us with data showing mental inferiority in the Troglytes."

"That's impossible, Bones! They have accepted personal sacrifice for a common cause. Mentally inferior beings aren't capable of that much abstract loyalty."

"I've checked the findings thoroughly," McCoy said gently. "Their intellect ratings are almost twenty percent below the planetary average."

Spock turned from his hooded computer. "But they all belong to the same species," he reminded McCoy. Those who live on Stratos and those who live below all originated on the surface, not long ago. It is basic biological law that their physical and mental evolution must have been similar."

"True enough, Spock. But obviously the ancestors of those who live on Stratos had left the environment of the mines. That's how they avoided further effects of their influence."

"What influence?" Kirk asked.

McCoy held out a small sealed container, carefully.

"This is a low zenite ore sample I had brought from the surface. If I unsealed the container, it would have detrimental effects on everybody here."

"Zenite is shipped all over the galaxy wherever there's danger of plant plague," Spock protested. "No side effects have been reported."

"After it's refined there are none. But in its natural state it emits an odorless, invisible gas which retards the cortical functioning of the brain. At the same time it heightens emotional imbalance, causing violent reactions."

"Then the mines must be full of this gas," Kirk said.

McCoy nodded. "And the Troglytes breath it constantly."

"But the Disruptors—Vanna, for instance. They've outwitted a highly organized culture, apparently for years."

"Captain," Spock said, "you will recall Vanna's experience as a servant in Plasus' household. She was removed from exposure to the gas for an apparently significant period. Perhaps without long exposure, its effects slowly wear off."

"They do," McCoy said. "The other Disruptors probably have similar histories."

"Any way of neutralizing the gas, Bones?"

"No. But filter masks would eliminate the exposure."

"Get one, Bones—or make a mock-up of one, fast-end report back here on the double. Lieutenant Uhura, call Advisor Plasus."

After a considerable interval, the Council gallery materialized on the main viewing screen. Plasus was sitting at the cubical table, drinking slowly.

"Your further communication is not welcome, Captain," he said.

"I may be able to change your mind," Kirk said. "At least, I hope so. My ship's surgeon has made a crucial discovery. He has found that zenite ore discharges a gas that impairs brain function. He thinks he can counteract it."

McCoy appeared at Kirk's elbow, a face mask in his hand. That is the case, Mr Advisor. This filter arrangement in my hand is a gas mask. It eliminates all gases injurious to humanoid life. If others like it are distributed to the miners, we can confidently expect them to achieve intellectual equality with Stratos inhabitants, perhaps quite soon."

Plasus dropped the goblet. "Who are you? Who are you to talk of 'intellectual equality' for—for *Troglytes?*"

"Let me present Dr McCoy, Medical Officer of the *Enterprise,* Mr Advisor," Kirk said. "We have checked his findings with our computers. They are absolutely valid."

"Are you saying that this comical mask can accomplish what centuries of evolution have failed to do?"

"Yes. That's what I said, Mr Advisor."

"Centuries isn't a long time in terms of evolution," McCoy added.

"And do your computers also explain how my ancestors managed to create a magnificence like Stratos City while the Troglytes remained savages?"

"Your ancestors removed themselves from contamination by the gas," Spock said.

"Preposterous!"

"We have no time to argue," Kirk said. "I propose to inform Vanna that the filters are available."

"I doubt that even Vanna will credit such nonsense!"

"Are you afraid that the filters might work, Mr Advisor?"

Kirk's question obviously hit home. Plasus stamped his foot on the iridescent floor. "You are here to complete an emergency mission, Captain! Not to conduct unauthorized tests!"

"I am here to collect a zenite consignment," Kirk said. "If these masks will help me do it, I will use them."

"I forbid it, Captain! Your Federation orders do not entitle you to defy local governments." Plasus reached for a switch. "This communication is ended."

As he faded from the screen, Kirk said, "My diplomacy seems to be somewhat inadequate."

"Pretty hard to overcome prejudice, Jim."

Kirk nodded. "Doesn't leave us much choice, does it?"

"Not much time, Captain," Spock said. "There are now ten hours and forty minutes left us to deliver the consignment to Marak II."

Kirk took the mask from McCoy. "Alert the Transporter Room to beam me down to Vanna's confinement quarters, Mr Spock."

"Jim! You're returning to Stratos against government orders?"

"Unless Vanna has something definite to gain for her people, she'll die, Bones, before she turns over the zenite to us."

Spock intervened, an undertone of anxiety in his voice. "If you are apprehended violating the High Advisor's orders, he will consider it within his rights to execute you."

Kirk grinned. "If you're about to suggest that *you* contact Vanna, the answer is negative, Mr Spock;" And that goes for you, too, Bones."

Spock said stiffly, "Allow me to point out that a First Officer is more expendable than either a doctor or a Captain, sir."

"This mission is strictly unofficial," Kirk said. "Nobody is to have any part of it—or take any responsibility for it but myself. That's an order, Mr Spock."

Silently the Vulcan detached his phaser from his belt and handed it to Kirk. Kirk took it, saying, "You have the con, Mr Spock. Stand by until I contact you."

Vanna's confinement quarters were narrow, barely wide enough to accommodate a slim sleep dais and a small cube table. Her face still drawn from her ordeal, she was pacing the short length of the cell when she halted in amazement at the sight of him.

"I've brought you a gift," he said, and held out the mask to her. "Listen to me carefully, Vanna. In the mines there's a dangerous gas that affects the development of the Troglytes who are exposed to it too long. This mask will prevent any further damage and allow recovery to take place."

He laid the mask on the table and waited for her surprise to subside. She made no move toward the table.

"Gas from zenite?" she said suspiciously. "It's hard to believe that something we can neither see nor feel can do much harm."

"An idea isn't seen or felt, Vanna. But a mistaken idea is what's kept the Troglytes in the mines all these centuries."

"Will all the Troglytes receive these masks?"

"I will arrange to have Federation engineers help construct them."

She faced him, her eyes pondering. "Suppose Plasus will not agree?"

"Plasus is not the whole government," Kirk said.

"But the City Council will not listen to Troglytes."

"When the zenite is delivered, we'll come back. Then I'll request permission to mediate for the Troglytes. I give you my word."

"Stratos," she said, "was built by leaders who gave their word that all inhabitants would live there. The Troglytes are still waiting."

"This time you won't have to wait," he said gently. "We'll deliver the zenite in a few hours."

Her face was tormented. "Hours can become centuries just as words can be lies."

Kirk grasped her shoulders. "You must trust me, Vanna! If you don't, millions of people will die! A whole planet will die! The zenite is all that can save them—and the masks are all that can save the Troglytes!"

She closed her eyes for a moment, swaying. Then she said, "Very well, Captain. But the consignment is deep in the mines. I cannot tell you how to find it. I must take you to it."

Kirk hesitated. "Valuable hostages" was the phrase Plasus had used. There was no getting away from the fact that Captain James Kirk of the *Enterprise* would qualify as a very valuable hostage.

But he had asked for her trust; he would have to give her his. He took out his communicator.

"Kirk to Scott. Beam us both up, and then back down to the mines."

Blinking in the planet's relentlessly glaring sunlight, Kirk drew the mask down over his head. Through its goggles, he could see Vanna's delicate figure, a dark shadow against the darker shadows of the mine's entrance, vanish into blackness. He followed her.

They were moving down a steeply descending tunnel. Ahead of him Kirk could discern faint glimmers of unidentifiable light Then they were in a large cavern. Its walls glowed greenly with the phosphorescence of zenite ore lodes that etched themselves in cabalistic scribbles on the rock face like messages left by witches. Other jagged rocks jutted from the floor. The cavern might have been an underground graveyard of magicians' tombstones.

A miner's mortae lay against one of the floor's peaked rocks. Picking it up, Vanna struck the rock three times; the rock rang like a gong. As the sound died, Kirk heard a stealthy movement from a narrow ledge high on the left wall of the cave. Two big, begrimed Troglytes were climbing down a series of crude steps, hewed into the rock, to the cavern floor.

Vanna touched their shoulders in greeting. Their faces lightened. "Anka, Midro," she said.

"Vanna. It is you.", Anka, the bigger Troglyte, touched her shoulder in similar greeting. "You have returned."

"And I have brought you a hostage," she said. "Seize him!"

The Troglytes grabbed Kirk's arms so swiftly that he could not make a move in defense. They were twisted behind him as Vanna, jerking his phaser from his belt, thrust it into hers. Then she snatched his communicator and hurled it against a sharp-toothed outcropping of rock a few feet away.

Kirk found his voice, but it was unfamiliar, hoarse, distorted by the mask. "We had a bargain. Why are you breaking it?"

"Did you really think I would trust you, Captain?"

"I trusted you," he said.

"You thought you'd tricked me with your talk of unseen gas and filters. I don't believe in it any more than Plasus does."

"Then you are a fool," Kirk said. "The filters can free you just as I said they could."

"Only weapons will free us," she retorted. "And you have just furnished us with two valuable ones. Yourself—and this." She touched the phaser in her belt

"Holding me will not help you. My men will still come for the zenite consignment."

She laughed. "Without that," she said, pointing to the communicator, "you will be hard to locate."

"They will find me," Kirk said.

"Perhaps." She removed his mask and draped it over a mortae thrust into a crevice on the wall. "I don't think you will be needing this." Then she had a second thought, and taking the mask down again, handed it to Anka. "Send this to Plasus. It will inform him that we have more to bargain with than our mortaes and thongs."

Anka's eyes brightened. "You are clever, Vanna. Very clever."

He hurried out of the cavern and she turned to Midro. "Go to the other mines and tell the Troglytes to post watchers. Search parties may be coming soon."

Midro pointed to Kirk. "What of him?"

Vanna drew the phaser from her belt. "I will see that he does not escape."

"If we kill him," Midro said, "there'll be no need to see to that."

"A dead hostage is useless," she told him.

His face set stubbornly. "Only the Troglytes need know."

"I brought him—and I will say what is to be done."

"You're not the only Disruptor," Midro said sullenly. "I too can say."

"Can you do nothing but argue?" she cried impatiently. "Hurry—or the searchers will be here!"

"When Anka returns, we will *all* say." Nevertheless, he left.

Vanna kept the phaser leveled on Kirk. "Now, Captain, dig," she said. "Dig for zenite as the Troglytes do. I will give you a lesson in what our lives are like."

Silently, Kirk turned to the wall. It proved to be hard work. There was a bag on the floor in which he was told to put the chunks of ore; it took him a long time to get it half full. Vanna watched, smiling, as immaculate Captain James Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise* tore a nail on a bleeding finger.

"Is that what the Disruptors are working for?" he said. "The right to kill everyone?"

"Midro is a child."

"The filter masks could change that."

"Keep digging. You do it well, Captain. The unseen gas doesn't seem to be harming you."

"It takes a while for the effects to become noticeable." He straightened his aching back. "How long do you plan to keep me here? Providing Midro doesn't kill me, of course."

"Until we have help in the mines and our homes in the clouds."

"That might be quite a while." Kirk loosened another chunk of ore. "Longer than I can wait!"

He hurled the rough lump full in her face. She staggered back with a cry, and a moment later Kirk had wrested the phaser from her. He leveled it at the cavern entrance and fired. The boulders supporting it disintegrated, and the whole upper portion of its walls crumbled with a crash, sealing the entrance with a massive pile of rubble.

"You have trapped us!"

"Obviously."

"But soon the atmosphere will go! We will die!"

"Die? From something we cannot see or feel? You astound me, Vanna." He picked his way over the rubble to his communicator. As he had rather expected, it was unharmed; these instruments had been designed for rough use. "Kirk to *Enterprise.*"

"Spock here, Captain. Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing. Are you locked in on me?"

"Locked in, sir. Ready to beam up consignment."

"Circumstances dictate a slight variation, Mr Spock." Kirk eyed Vanna warily. "Hold on these coordinates. Locate the High Advisor and beam him down to me immediately. Without advance communication. Repeat—*without advance communication.*"

"Instructions clear, sir. We'll carry through at once. Spock out"

"You will seal Plasus in here also?" Vanna had gone rigid with alarm.

"I am preparing a slight demonstration of the effects of unbelieved gas," Kirk said. He waited. After a moment, the cavern shimmered and Plasus materialized. Such fury shook him when he saw Kirk that at first he failed to register the greenish darkness of his surroundings.

"Abduction of a planetary official is a serious crime, Captain! You will pay for it, I promise!"

Awe struggled with the alarm on Vanna's face. Kirk leveled the phaser at them both. "Not till you're convinced of the effects of zenite gas, Mr Advisor."

"What effects? I see no change in either of you!"

"You need closer exposure." He waved to the half-filled bag at the cavern wall. "Fill that container."

"You suggest that I dig zenite?"

Kirk waved the phaser. "I insist, Mr Advisor."

Plasus' fists clenched. "You will indeed pay for this, Captain." After eyeing the steady phaser for a moment, he turned to the wall, and began to scrabble at the open zenite lode. It was quickly obvious that he had never done any physical labor before in his life.

Kirk's jaw hardened, and he smiled a cold, thin smile. He felt strangely vindictive, and was enjoying it. "You too, Vanna."

She stared at him for a moment, and then obediently turned also to the wall.

Time passed. After a while, the communicator beeped. "*Enterprise* to Captain."

"What is it, Spock?'

"Contact check, sir. May I remind you that there are only five hours left to—"

"Your orders were to stand by. Carry them out."

"Standing by."

Kirk clicked out. Both his laborers were beginning to show signs of exhaustion. Vanna leaned against the wall for a moment. "I grow faint," she whispered. "The oxygen is going."

"She is right," said Plasus, panting. "You must have us transported out of here."

"Dig."

"You imbecile! We'll die!" Plasus cried.

Kirk backhanded him. "I said, *dig!*"

Knocked back against the wall, arms spread, Plasus snarled, an animal at bay; all trace of the urbane ruler of Ardana had vanished. "I will take no more orders!" He lurched forward.

Kirk jerked the phaser. "Another step and I'll kill you."

Vanna stared at Kirk's distorted face. "Captain—the gas!" she choked out "You were right! It *is* affecting you!"

Plasus took the cue. "Are you as brave with a mortae as you are with a phaser?" he taunted.

Infuriated, Kirk tossed the phaser to the floor. Plasus scooped two mortae from the rock ledge, and one in each hand, charged Kirk like a clumsy bull, slashing. Kirk dodged, grabbed Plasus' right wrist and tumbled him with a karate twist. The head struck rock. The two mortae clanged on the floor and Kirk leapt for Plasus' throat. As he fell on the High Advisor, the communicator dropped from his belt.

Vanna grabbed it and began shouting. "*Enterprise! Enterprise!*" It remained dead. Vanna shook it, and then found the switch. "*Enterprise!* Help! They will kill each other! Help us."

For a moment, nothing happened. Kirk's fingers lightened on Plasus' throat Then the cavern shimmered out of existence, and he found himself wrestling on the Transporter platform of the *Enterprise.*

"Captain!" Spock's voice shouted. "Stop! The gas—"

Kirk let go and got groggily to his feet. "The gas? What gas?" He looked around, almost without recognition. The Transporter Room was full of armed security guards. Vanna was cowering; Plasus was crawling off the platform, all defiance fled. It had been a near thing.

The Council gallery of Stratos City resembled a first rehearsal reading of a play, Kirk thought. The whole cast was assembled. He hoped they had all learned their lines.

"I understand you are going to get what you came for," Plasus said.

"Yes, Mr Advisor."

"The zenite will be delivered exactly as I agreed," Vanna said.

But Plasus hadn't yet learned all his lines. He turned on her. "The word 'agreed' is not in the Troglyte vocabulary."

"The Captain will have his zenite."

"No thanks to any agreement by you. It had to be obtained by force."

"Force has served your purpose at times," she said.

"And bribery," Plasus said, stubborn to the last, "Those masks."

Kirk had had enough. "The masks will be very effective, Mr Advisor. The Troglytes will no longer suffer mental retardation and emotional imbalance."

"No," said Plasus. "They will all be like this one—ungrateful and vindictive."

As he spoke, two sentinels entered the gallery staggering under the weight of an immense box. "There," Vanna said, "is the zenite. My word is kept."

"As mine will be," Kirk said. "Thank you, Vanna." He took out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*…

Mr Scott, the zenite is here in the Council gallery. Have it beamed up immediately… Mr Spock—"

He broke off. Spock and Droxine had drifted to the balustrade. The hand of Ardana's incomparable work of art was on Spock's arm.

"I don't like 'filters' or even 'masks,' " she was saying. "I think the word 'protectors' is much better, don't you, Mr Spock?"

"It is less technical," he told her. "And therefore, less accurate." He looked down at the hand on his arm. "But perhaps it is more generally descriptive of their function."

" 'Protectors' is more personal," she said. "I shall be the first to test them. I shall go down into the mines. I no longer wish to be limited to the clouds."

"There is great beauty in what lies below. And there is only one way to experience it, madame."

"Is your planet like this?" She looked up at him.

"Vulcan is quite different," Spock said. His back was stiff.

"Someday, I should like to see it."

"You cannot remain on Stratos," Spock replied, "if you wish to make a real test of… a protector."

Kirk judged it time to intervene. "Mr Spock, I think it is time. We've got just three hours to get the zenite to Marak II."

Spock turned from the balustrade. Removing the white hand from his arm, he bowed over it. Then he straightened.

"To be exact, Captain," he said, "two hours and fifty-nine minutes."

THE WAY TO EDEN

(Arthur Heinemann and Michael Richards)

Under Federation orders to observe extreme delicacy, the *Enterprise* had beamed aboard the six people who had stolen the cruiser *Aurora.* The son of the Catullan Ambassador was one of them, and treaty negotiations between the Federation and the Ambassador were at a crucial phase. Clearly, none of the six had known much about operating a cruiser; in the attempt to escape, they had managed to destroy the cruiser, and had only been rescued by Scott's pinpoint skill with the Transporter.

"Scotty, are they aboard?" Kirk asked his control chair intercom.

"Aye, Captain, they are. And a nice lot, too."

"Escort them to the briefing room for interview."

There were other voices in the background, rising in an increasing hubbub. Suddenly a woman's voice became clearly audible above the others. "Why should we?"

At that, Chekov's head jerked up sharply, his expression one of recognition struggling with incredulity. Then a man's voice said, "Tell Herbert it's no go."

All the voices chimed in with a ragged chant: "No go no go no go no go…"

"What's going on?" Kirk asked.

"They refuse, sir," Scott called over the chant.

"Why?"

"I don't know. They're just sitting on the floor, the lot of them. You can hear them yourself. Shall I send for Security?"

"No, I'll come down. Sulu, take the con."

He and Spock could hear the chanting continuing long before he reached the Transporter Room. The six were, indeed, "a nice lot." One wore a simple robe, the others were nearly naked or in primitive costumes, with flowers worn as ornaments and painted on their bodies. There were three girls and three men, all but the

one in the robe in their early twenties. They were squatting on the floor with a clutter of musical instruments around them.

"We are not in the mood, Herbert," one of the girls said; it was the same voice he had heard before. The others resumed the "No go" chant.

"Which one of you is Tongo Rad?" Kirk shouted.

The chant died down raggedly, and the newcomers looked curiously from Kirk to one of their number, a handsome humanoid who despite his costume had that intangible air which often goes with wealth and privilege. He got up and lunged forward, not answering, not quite insolent.

"You can thank your father's influence for the fact that you're not under arrest," Kirk snapped. "In addition to piracy, you're open to charges of violating flight regulations, entering hostile space and endangering the lives of others as well as your own."

"Hostile space?" Rad said.

"You were in Romulan territory when we yanked you out."

"Oh," said Rad. "I'm bleeding."

"On top of which you've caused an interstellar incident that could destroy everything that has been negotiated between your planet and the Federation."

"You got a hard lip, Herbert."

"If you have an explanation, I'm prepared to hear it."

Rad looked down at the older man in the robe, but there was no response. Rad sat down with the others and folded his arms.

Kirk turned to Spock. "Take them to sickbay for medical check. There may be radiation injury from the *Aurora* explosion."

The "No go" chant started up again immediately. Kirk started to shout, but Spock intervened.

"With your permission, Captain." He put his hands together, index finger to index finger, thumb to thumb, forming an egg shape. "One."

The group seemed to be surprised. The man in the robe rose. "We are one."

"One is the beginning," Spock said.

One of the boys, a rather puckish youth, said, "You One, Herbert?"

"I am not Herbert."

"He's not Herbert. We reach."

Kirk was wholly bewildered. Evidently all this meant something, however, and had almost miraculously achieved calm and accord.

"Sir," Spock said to the older man, "if you will state your purpose and objectives, perhaps we can arrive at mutual understanding.

"If you understand One, you know our purpose."

"I should prefer that you state it."

The older man smiled faintly. "We turn our backs on confusion and seek the beginning."

"Your destination?"

"The planet Eden."

"Ridiculous," Kirk said. That planet's a myth."

Still smiling, the older man said, "And we protest against being harassed, pursued, attacked, seized, and Transported here against our wishes and against human law."

"Right, brother," said the puckish youth.

"We do not recognize Federation regulations nor the existence of hostilities. We recognize no authority but that within ourselves."

"Whether you recognize authority or not, I am it on this ship," Kirk said, restraining himself with difficulty. "I am under orders to take you back to Starbase peaceably. From there you will be ferried back to your various planets. Because of my orders you are not prisoners, but my guests. I expect you to behave as such."

"Oh, Herbert," said the puckish youth, "you are *stiff.*"

"Mr Spock, since you seem to understand these people, you will deal with them."

"We respectfully request that you take us to Eden," the robed man said. Despite the politeness of the words, and the softness of his voice, his insolence was obvious.

Kirk ignored him. "When they're finished in sickbay, see that they are escorted to the proper quarters and given whatever care they need."

"Yes, Captain."

"We respectfully request that you take us to Eden."

"I have orders to the contrary. And this is not a passenger ship."

"Herbert," said the girl who had first spoken. The others picked it up and another ragged chant followed Kirk as he went out: "Herbert Herbert Herbert Herbert…"

He was in a simmering rage by the time he returned to the bridge. Taking his seat, he said, "Lieutenant Uhura. Alert Starbase

we have aboard the six who took the space cruiser *Aurora.* And that the cruiser itself was regrettably destroyed."

"Aye, sir."

"Personal note to the Catullan Ambassador. His son is safe."

"Captain, sir," Chekov said hesitantly. "I believe I know one of them. At least I think I recognized her voice. Her name is Irina Galliulin. We were in Starfleet Academy together."

"One of those went to the *Academy?*" Kirk said incredulously.

"Yes, sir. She dropped out. She—" Chekov stopped. Under his accent and his stiffness, it was apparent that he still felt a painful emotion about this girl.

Kirk looked away as Spock entered, and then back to Chekov. "Do you wish to see her? Permission granted to leave your post."

"Thank you, sir." He got up fast and left; another crewman took his post.

Kirk turned to Spock. "Are they in sickbay?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Do they seriously believe that Eden exists?"

"Many myths are founded on some truth, Captain. And they are not unintelligent. Dr Sevrin…"

"Their leader? The man in the robe?"

Spock nodded. "Dr Sevrin was a brilliant research engineer in acoustics, communications and electronics on Tiburon. When he started the movement, he was dismissed from his post. Young Rad inherits his father's extraordinary abilities in the field of space studies."

"But they reject that—everything this technology provides—and look for the primitive."

"There are many who are uncomfortable with what we have created," Spock said. "It is almost a biological rebellion. A profound revulsion against the planned communities, the programming, the sterilized, artfully balanced atmospheres. They hunger for an Eden, where Spring comes."

"We all do, sometimes," Kirk said thoughtfully. "The cave is deep in our ancestral memories."

"Yes, sir."

"But we don't steal cruisers and act like irresponsible children. What makes you so sympathetic toward them?"

"It is not so much sympathy as curiosity, Captain. A wish to understand. And they regard themselves as aliens in their worlds.

It is a feeling I am familiar with."

"Hmm. What does Herbert mean?"

"It is somewhat uncomplimentary, sir. Herbert was a minor official notorious for his rigid and limited pattern of thought."

"I get the point," Kirk said drily. "I shall endeavor to be less limited in my thinking. But they make it difficult"

There were only five of the six in the examining room when Chekov came in. Four were sprawled about listening to the puckish youth, who was tuning something that looked like a zither. Apparently satisfied, he bit a progression of chords and began to sing softly.*

*I much regret that I cannot reproduce the music which went with this script; it was of very high quality. The script I have does not name the composer.—J. B.

Looking for the new land—
Losing my way—
Looking for the good land—
Going astray—
Don't cry.
Don't cry.
Oh I can't have honey and I can't have cream
But the dream that's in me, it isn't a dream.
It'll live, not die.
It'll live, not die.
I'll stand in the middle of it all one day,
I'll look at it shining all around me and say
I'm here!
I'm here!
In the new land,
In the good land,
I'm here!

"Great, Adam," one of the others said. There was a murmur of applause.

Chekov cleared his throat. "Excuse me. Is Irina Galliulin with you?"

"Getting her physical," Adam said. He hit a chord and sang:

I'll crack my knuckles and jump for joy—

Got a clean bill of health from Dr McCoy.

"You know Irina?" someone else said. Chekov nodded.

"Say, tell me," said Tongo Rad. "Why do you people wear all those clothes? How do you breathe?"

Nurse Chapel came out of the sickbay with two medics. She looked over the group and pointed to Sevrin, "You're next."

Sevrin sprawled, oblivious. Chapel nodded to the two medics, who stepped forward and, picking up the limp form, dragged it into sickbay. A moment later, Irina came out.

"Irina," Chekov said.

She did not seem to be surprised. She smiled, her strange, habitual smile, which rarely left her—but there was watchfulness behind it.

"Pavel Andreievich," she said calmly. "I had thought we might encounter each other."

"You knew I was on the *Enterprise?*"

"I had heard."

"Irina—why—" He stopped, all eyes upon him. "Come."

He led her out into the corridor, which was empty. He stared at her for a moment, taking in the bizarre, brief costume, the long hair, the not-quite-untidiness. When he spoke, it was almost with rage.

"How could you do this to yourself? You were a scientist. You were a—a decent human being. And now look at you!"

"Look at yourself, Pavel," she said calmly.

"Why did you do it?"

"Why did you?"

"I am proud of what I am. I believe in what I do. Can you say that?"

"Yes." Momentarily her voice was sharp; then the smile returned. Chekov took her arm and they walked toward the lounge. "We should not tear at each other so. We should meet again in joy. Today, when I first knew it was your ship that followed us, I thought of you, I wondered what I would find in you. And I remembered so much. In spite of that uniform, I still see the Pavel I used to know. Are you happy in what you do?"

"Yes."

"Then I accept what you do."

"You even talk like them."

Yeomen passed them, turning to look at the odd couple. Chekov led Irina into the lounge. "Why did you go away?" he asked.

"It was you who went."

"I came back to look for you. I looked. I looked. Where did you go?"

"I stayed in the city. With friends."

"You never felt as I did. Never."

"I did."

"You don't have it in you to feel so much. Even when we were close you weren't with me. You were off thinking of something else." She shook her head, the smile still there. "Then why did you stay away?"

"Because you disapproved of me. Just as you do now. Oh, Pavel, you have always been like this. So correct. And inside, the struggle not to be. Give in to yourself. You will be happier. You'll see."

"Go to your friends," Chekov said grayly.

After a moment she left, still with that maddening smile. There seemed to be another hubbub starting in the corridor. Chekov went after her, quickly.

The noise was coming from outside sickbay, where there was something very like a melee going on. The group from the *Aurora* was trying to get in, over the opposition of Nurse Chapel and two security guards. The group was shouting noisily, angrily, demanding entrance, demanding to see Sevrin.

Kirk came out of the elevator and forced his way through the crowd, not without a what-the-hell glance toward Chekov.

"Herbert Herbert Herbert Herbert Herbert . . ."

The sickbay doors shut automatically behind Kirk and Nurse Chapel, mercifully deadening the sound. "I thought all those animals were in their cages," she said.

Sevrin was sitting on a bed, defiant, the two medics standing ready to grab him. McCoy was finishing what had evidently been a strenuous examination.

"What's going on, Bones?"

"Trouble. Your friend here didn't want a checkup. Turns out there was a reason."

"I refuse to accept your findings," Sevrin said.

"You don't have the choice."

"They are the product of prejudice, not science."

"I don't know what this man was planning to do on a primitive planet," McCoy continued. "Assuming it existed. But I can tell you what would happen if he'd settled there. Within a month there wouldn't be enough of those primitives left to bury their dead."

"Fantasy," Sevrin said. "Fantasy."

"I wish it were. There's a nasty little bug evolved in the last few years, Jim. Our aseptic, sterilized civilizations produced it. *Synthococcus novae.* It's deadly. We can immunize against it but we haven't licked all its problems yet"

"Does he have it?" Kirk asked. "What about the others?"

"The others are clear. And he doesn't have it. He's a carrier. Remember your ancient history? Typhoid Mary? He's immune to it, as she was. But he carries the disease, spreads it to others."

"Is the crew in danger?"

"Probably not. They all had full spectrum immunizations before boarding. My guess is that his friends had their shots too. But a regular program of booster shots is necessary. I'll have to check on everyone aboard. There may have been some skips. Until that's done, this fellow should be kept in total isolation."

"This is outrageous," Sevrin said. "There is nothing wrong with me. You're not isolating me, you're imprisoning me. You invent the crime, find me guilty, sentence me…"

"Would you like to run the tests yourself, Doctor?" There was no answer. "You knew you were a carrier before you started out, didn't you?"

"No!"

"Then why did you fight the examination?"

"It was an infringement on my rights as a human being…"

"Oh, stop ranting."

"Put him in isolation," Kirk said.

"Be ready for his friends' objections. They're a vocal lot."

"I'm ready."

There was still a crowd in the corridor; four of the *Aurora* group (one girl was missing) were sitting or sprawling on the deck; among them stood Sulu, Chekov and several crewmen. The protesters were chanting, but this time each of them had a different slogan.

"Eden now!"

"Free Ton Sevrin!"

"James T. Kirk is a brachycephalic jerk!"

"McCoy is a doctor of veterinary medicine!"

Sulu was talking to one of the girls, between slogans. He seemed confused but fascinated. Thus far no one had noticed Kirk's arrival.

"You don't belong with them," the girl was telling Sulu. "You know what we want. You want it yourself. Come, join us."

"How do you know what I want, Mavig?"

"You're young. Think young, brother." Lifting a hand to him, she gave him an egg.

"Mr Sulu," Kirk said sharply. Sulu started, stiffened with embarrassment, and hastily gave the egg back to Mavig. "Explain, Mr Sulu."

"No explanation, sir."

Kirk turned to the group, which had gotten even noisier upon seeing him, "Dr Sevrin will be released as soon as we determine it is medically safe."

"Herbert Herbert Herbert Herbert…"

Ignoring them, Kirk strode toward the elevator with Sulu, stepping over the bodies. Chekov followed. As he approached Irina, she lay back provocatively.

"Don't stay with Herbert. Join us. You'll be happier. Come, Pavel."

"Link up, Pavel," Adam said.

"Join us."

"Link up, Pavel. Link up, Pavel."

Adam struck a chord on his instrument and began to sing:

> Stiff man putting my mind in jail—
>
> Judge bangs the gavel, and says No bail—
>
> So I'll lick his hand and wag my tail…

Blessedly the elevator doors opened at this point, and Kirk, Sulu and Chekov made their escape.

The bridge was a haven of routine activity, with Spock in charge. Chekov and Sulu went to their posts. But before Kirk could settle, the intercom cut in with its signal.

"Engineering to bridge," Scott's voice said.

"Kirk here."

"Captain, I just had to give one of those barefooted what-do-you-call-ems the boot out of here. She came in bold as brass, tried

to incite my crew to disaffect."

"All right, Scotty." He shut the intercom off and turned to Spock, his irritation finally breaking out. "Mr Spock, I don't seem to communicate with these people. Do you think you can persuade them to behave?"

"I shall endeavor, sir."

"If it weren't for that Ambassador's son, they'd be in the brig."

"Yes, sir." Spock went out.

He found Sevrin sitting cross-legged in the isolation ward, in a yoga-like position, a cold, hostile figure. There was one security guard in the corridor outside. Spock stood on the other side of the isolation shield.

"Doctor, can you not keep your people from interfering with the running of the ship?"

"I have no influence over what they do."

"They respect you. They will listen to your reasoning. For their sake, Doctor, you must stop them."

The baleful eyes lifted to Spock's face, answer enough in themselves.

"Dr Sevrin, I can assist you and your group. I can use the resources of the *Enterprise* to establish whether or not Eden exists, and to plot its exact location. I can present a case to Federation that would allow your group to colonize that planet." There was no answer. "Neither you nor they are at present charged with any crime worse than theft, plus a few lesser matters. The charges may be waived. But incitement to mutiny would tip the balance. And Federation would never allow the colonization of a planet by criminals. If they persist, they will be so charged, and forever barred from Eden."

"As I have been barred," Sevrin said softly. The voice was low, but the gleaming eyes were those of a fanatic.

Spock hesitated a moment. "Then you knew you were a carrier?"

"Of course I knew. You have researched my life. You have read the orders restricting me to travel only in areas of advanced technology, because of what my body carries."

"I fail to understand why you should disobey them."

"Because this is poison to me!" Sevrin looked around, as if seeing all the technology of the ship, representing all the technology of space. "This stuff you breathe, this stuff you live on. The shields of artificial atmosphere we have layered about every

planet. The programs in those computers that run your ship and your lives for you. Those bred what my body carries! This is what your sciences have done for me! You have infected me!"

He shook his fist at the ceiling; his "you" was obviously not Spock but the whole Galaxy. He began to pace.

"Only the primitives can cleanse me. I cannot purge myself until I am among them. Only their way of living is right. I must go to them."

"Your very presence will destroy the people you seek out! Surely you know that."

"I shall go to them and be one of them. Together we will make a world such as this Galaxy has never seen. A world, a life. A life!" His passion spent, Sevrin sat down, and after a moment lifted his head to look at Spock, a faint smile on his lips. "And now you are about to assure me that your technologies will find a cure for me. And I will be free to go."

"Yes, Doctor."

"And for that reason I must persuade my friends to behave, so they too will be allowed."

"Yes."

"Send them in," Sevrin said, smiling still. "Ill talk to them."

It was an uneasy victory, whose outcome was uncertain. Spock went back to the bridge.

"They've been a lot quieter," Kirk reported. "How did you accomplish it?"

"It had nothing to do with me. Could I speak to you a moment, sir?"

Kirk rose and both went to Spook's console. "What is it?"

"Dr Sevrin is insane. I did not consult Dr McCoy. But I have no doubt of it."

"I'll have Bones check him again," Kirk said, stunned. "You had great respect for him. I'm sorry, Mr Spock. But it explains some of what they've done."

"His collapse does not affect my sympathy with the movement, sir. There is no insanity in what they seek—I made a promise which I should like to keep. With your permission, I must locate Eden. I shall work in my quarters. May I have the assistance of Mr Chekov in the auxiliary control room?"

"Mr Chekov, assist Mr Spock."

The auxiliary control room was deserted except for Chekov, who was at the plotting console, bent over the computer, studying.

Spock's voice came over the intercom. "Ready for your plottings, Mr Chekov."

Chekov fed a tape into the computer. The door opened, and Irina entered, hesitantly. "Am I allowed in?" she asked.

He concentrated stiffly on his work. "Yes."

"I have been looking for you, Pavel. What room is this?"

"Auxiliary control."

"What's it for?"

"Should the main control room break down or suffer damage, we can navigate the ship from here."

"Oh."

"What do you want?"

"To apologize. I should not have teased you. It was cruel."

"It doesn't matter," Chekov said.

"But it does. It is against everything I believe in."

"Let us not discuss your beliefs."

"And I do not like having you angry with me," she said softly. "Or disapproving."

"Then why do you do such things?"

She began to wander about the room, examining the panels in seeming childlike curiosity. Chekov continued working, but his eyes followed her when she was not looking in his direction. Then she came back to him. "What are you working on?"

"I am assisting Mr Spock in locating your Eden."

"Now you are teasing me," she said in sudden sharpness.

"I am not. These tapes contain star charts, and we project the orbits of the various known planetary systems here, determining by a mathematical process whether or not they are affected by other bodies not yet charted."

"Do you know all these things?"

"What I do not know I find out from the computer banks. If I knew nothing at all, I could navigate this ship simply by studying what is stored in there. They contain the sum of all human knowledge. They solve our problems of navigation, of control, of life support…"

She bent over the computer, close to him. They tell you what do do. And you do what they tell you."

"No. We use our own judgment also."

She came still closer. "I could never obey a computer."

"You could never listen to anyone. You always had to be different."

"Not different. What I wanted to be. There is nothing wrong in doing what you want."

She faced him, smiling still. Abruptly Chekov arose, took her in his arms, and kissed her hungrily.

"I am not receiving, Mr Chekov," said the intercom. "Spock to Mr Chekov. Repeat. I am not receiving."

Chekov broke free and opened his intercom. "I am sorry, Mr Spock. I was momentarily delayed."

With permission, the *Aurora* group had stored its gear and bedded down in the Recreation Room. Adam and Mavig were relaxing when Rad entered.

"His name is Sulu," Rad said. "Specialist in weapons and navigation. His hobby is botany."

"Can?" said Adam.

"Can. I reach botany. It's my favorite of studies. What's yours?"

"Vulcan. Spock is practically One now."

Irina came in; the others were instantly alert

"Everything can be handled from auxiliary control. The computers contain all the information we need. We can do it."

"It starts to chime," Adam said.

"When will it?" Rad wanted to know.

"Soonest Like Sevrin said, now, we should go out, swing as many over as we can."

"You suggest any special ways to swing them?"

"Just be friendly. You know how to be friendly, then they'll be friendly and well all be one. All right? Scatter. Remember, it's a party we're inviting them to and we're providing the entertainment."

"I like parties," Rad said.

"I like the entertainment we've planned. All hit numbers."

Adam and Rad grinned at each other. Then everyone went off, in different directions. Adam headed directly for Spock's quarters.

Spock said "Come in" absently. He was at his computer, studying the images, making notes. Adam approached him diffidently.

"Am I crossing you?" he asked. Spock shook his head. "I was wondering if—" He stopped, noting the lute hanging on the wall behind Spock. "Hey, brother. You play?"

Spock nodded.

"Is it Vulcan? Can I try it?"

Spock took the lute down and gave it to Adam, who tried several chords. "Oh, that's now. That's real now. I reach that, brother, I really do. Give."

He passed the lute back to Spock, who amusedly played a few runs.

"Hey. How about a session, you and us. It would *sound.* That's what I came for. I wanted to ask, you know, great white captain up there he don't reach us, but would he shake on a session? I mean, we want to cooperate like you asked, so I'm asking."

"If I understand you correctly," Spock said, "I believe the answer might be yes."

"I'll spread the word."

The Recreation Hall was jammed. Lights had been dimmed, with the effect of spotlighting the group. They were singing; for those crew members who could not be present, intercoms carried the music throughout the ship. The words went like this:

I'm talking about you.
I'm talking about me.
Long time back when the Galaxy was new,
Man found out what he had to do.
Found he had to eat and found he had to drink,
And a long time later he found he had to think.
(spoken)
I'm standing here wondering.
(sung)
If a man tells another man, 'Out of my way'
He piles up trouble for himself all day.
But all kinds of trouble come to an end
When a man tells another man, 'Be my friend.'
(spoken)
What's going to be?

(sung)

There's a mile wide emptiness between you and me,

Can't reach across it, hardly even see—

Someone ought to take a step one way or other.

Let's say goodbye—or let's say brother.

Hey out there

Hey out there

I see you

I see you

Let's get together and have some fun.

Don't know how to do it but it's got to be done.

There was enthusiastic applause. The three girls took up the song. The boys faded back, clapping rhythmically. The clapping soon spread throughout the audience.

On the bridge, Uhura, Sulu and Scott were at their posts, listening. When Kirk came in, Uhura turned the intercom off.

"Thank you."

"At least we know where they are and what they're doing," Scott said. "I don't know why a young head has to be an undisciplined one. Troublemakers."

"I made a bit of trouble at that age, Scotty. I think you may have."

The intercom buzzed. "Spock to bridge."

"Go ahead."

"Captain, something strange is taking place. Two of the boys slipped out of the group somewhere during the last five minutes, and now the girls are beginning to go. And it is not Haydn's Farewell Symphony they are staging, either."

"Come to the bridge."

"Something strange here too," Sulu said. "I have no response on controls. We're going off course."

Scott crossed to Sulu's console and checked it. "It's shorted—no, it's channeled over somewhere—yes, to auxiliary control."

As Spock entered, Kirk began calling. "Bridge to. auxiliary control. Bridge to auxiliary control."

"Captain," Spock said, "in my opinion someone else is running the ship."

"That's right, Captain," said Sevrin's voice from the intercom. "Someone else is running the ship. I am. All functions, Captain. Life support as well. I suggest that you do not attempt to regain control. I do not intend to return the helm to you until and unless we reach Eden. If I am in any way prevented from reaching that destination, I shall destroy the ship and all aboard."

Scott and Sulu had been frantically checking circuits. Now Scott said, "He can do it, Captain. He has got everything channeled over."

"Start a traceback on all circuits. See if you can bypass."

"Do that," Sevrin's voice said, "and I shall retaliate. I shall not warn you again."

"We are leaving the neutral zone now, Captain," Sulu said. "Bearing into Romulan space."

"Do you read any patrols, Mr Spock?"

"No, sir."

"They'll be on us soon enough. Dr Sevrin! You are violating Romulan space and endangering the peace of the Galaxy. They will see this as a military intrusion and attack. Bring her about. Now. If you bring her about and return to Starbase, nothing will be said about this."

"Like you said, brother Sevrin," said Adam's voice.

"If you do not, you will never reach Eden. You and this ship will be destroyed. We would be no match for a Romulan flotilla."

"He's got jelly in the belly," said Adam. "Real scared."

"Adam, Rad—you are being led by a man who is insane. You are being used by him. Spock, tell them."

"Adam," Spock said. "There is a file in the computer banks on Dr Sevrin. You will find in it a report attesting to the fact that he is a carrier of a bacillus strain known as *Synthococcus novae.*"

"Ain't that just awful?"

"You will also find a report from the same hospital giving a full psychiatric profile of him, projecting these actions of his."

"Yeah, brother."

"You know I reach you," Spock said. "I believe in what you seek. But there is a tragic difference between what you want and what he wants."

"You're making me cry," Adam said. Then he began to sing:

Heading out to Eden—

Yeah, brother!

Heading out to Eden—

Yeah, brother!

No more trouble in my body or my mind—

I'll live like a king on whatever I find—

Eat all the fruit and throw away the rind—

Yeah, brother!"

Kirk shut off the intercom; it was impossible even to try to determine a course of action through that noise. He got up and looked at Spock, who nodded.

"We are within sensor range of Eden and continuing to approach," he said.

"Whatever they're going to do, they'll do it now," Kirk said. "We have no choice left. Mr Spock, Mr Scott, come with me. And let's make it fast."

He led them down the corridors to auxiliary control.

"Phasers out and on full. Well cut through the door. If Sevrin stops Life Function, we should be able to get through and start it again before any serious consequences follow—I hope. Well take shortcuts in turn, so as not to risk killing somebody and damaging equipment when we hole through. I'll go first, then Spock, then Scott."

His phaser spat, followed by Spock's. Then another sound started, like the whine of an oscillator, going higher and higher. Spock, with his sensitive hearing, reacted first. He dropped his phaser and clapped his hands to his ears.

"Mr Spock!" As Kirk went to him the sound stopped. "It has stopped. It's all right, Mr Spock."

"It—hasn't stopped—Captain. It is beyond—no! Captain—they are using…"

Kirk's head suddenly swam. If there was an end to Spock's sentence, he never heard it.

An unknown time later, Kirk came to, finding the corridor just as before, Spock and Scott stirring to consciousness. No, not just as before; the door to auxiliary control was open, and there was no one in there.

The three of them got to their feet and staggered in. Spock pointed. "There it is. An ultrasonic generator, feeding into the

ventilation system…"

The First Officer suddenly leaped forward and smashed the device with an iron first.

"Why did you do that?" Kirk said. "The parts could have…"

"It was set to go off again in a few seconds, Captain—and this time on a killing frequency. It must have been Sevrin's work; I doubt that the youngsters would have let him do it had they known the device could be made lethal. Clearly he didn't intend us to get back to make any reports."

Kirk grabbed the intercom and began calling. "Kirk to bridge. Come in, do you read me? Engineering. Hangar deck. Transporter Room. Do you read me? Kirk to bridge."

"Captain?" Scott's voice said.

"Sulu here, Captain. What happened to us? I heard a whistle and then…"

"Never mind, Sulu," Kirk said. "Do we have control of the ship?"

"It's still all in auxiliary, sir," said Chekov's voice. "Some of the gear is jammed."

"Can we break orbit if we have to?"

"I think so, sir."

"Hangar deck to Captain."

"Kirk here."

"Sir, one of the shuttlecrafts has been taken. We were all knocked out…"

"Stand by. Mr Spock, do you read any Romulans?"

"Negative, Captain. I am picking up the shuttlecraft, however."

"Where?"

"It has landed. Sir, except for those aboard the shuttlecraft, I read no sign of life at all. Neither animal nor humanoid. And there are only five life forms aboard the craft."

"Auxiliary control to McCoy. Bones, are you all right?"

"Yes, Jim."

"Stand by the Transporter Room. Full medical gear."

"Bridge to Captain Kirk," said Uhura's voice. "Do you wish hailing frequency, sir?"

"No. They tried to destroy us. Let them think they succeeded. I want coordinates zeroed in so that when we beam down we are not visible to them. Mr Scott, the con is yours. If a Romulan patrol appears, hold in orbit; Lieutenant Uhura is to try to make them

understand. I don't want to provoke combat. Mr Chekov, join us in the Transporter Room. Mr Spock, you too."

The garden was brilliant with sunshine, dazzling with flower color, opulent with heavy-laden fruit trees, one of them a giant. But it was utterly silent. The landing party looked about in awe.

The legends were true, sir," Spock said in a low voice. "A fantastically beautiful planet."

"Eden," said Chekov.

Kirk said, "It almost—was this what they believed they'd find?" Spock nodded. "I can understand now. But why have they remained in their ship? Well, spread out and approach with caution."

The other three moved away. Kirk remained where he was, flipping open his communicator. "Dr Sevrin, this is Captain Kirk. You are under arrest. You will debark from your ship."

The shuttlecraft remained silent, its doors shut. Then there came a whimpering little sound, in Irina's voice. "No…"

"You will come out at once."

"No! No!" This time it was a scream of pure terror. Kirk went after McCoy.

"Bones, you heard that? What do you make of it?"

"She sounds terrified."

"Of what?"

McCoy took out his tricorder. "I don't know, Jim. I don't read anything abnormal. Wait a minute…"

There was a yell of pain from Chekov. He was standing by a flowering plant, his right fist clenched to his chest, his face contorted. They got to him fast.

"What is it, Chekov?"

"The flower, sir. I touched it. It's like fire."

McCoy forced him to unclench the fist. Fingers and palm were stained and seared. The surgeon aimed the tricorder at it, then at the flower, the plant proper, the grasses.

The sap in it is pure acid," McCoy said. "All the plant life. The grass, too." He took out his medical kit and smeared ointment over Chekov's hand.

"Their feet!" Kirk said. "They were barefoot! Don't touch a thing. Bones, will our clothing protect us?"

"For a short time."

"Captain," Spock called. "Come over here, please."

He was standing under the largest fruit tree. Kirk joined him and looked down. Adam lay dead on the ground, twisted, a half-eaten piece of fruit from the tree still clutched in his hand.

"Bones," said Kirk.

McCoy took readings. "Poison. The fruit is deadly."

Spock bent and picked up the body, his enormous strength holding it easily. He looked at Kirk. "His name was Adam."

Understanding now, Kirk walked to the shuttlecraft openly, Spock beside him. Kirk pushed a button, and the doors opened. He called in gently, "You will be cared for."

The girls and Rad came limping out, murmuring in pain.

"It hurts," Irina said.

"I know," Spock said. "It hurts us all."

Chekov went at once to Irina and held her comfortingly as McCoy began to treat her. Kirk went on inside the craft

Dr Sevrin sat on the deck in the yoga position, immobile, heedless of his blistered, naked feet. His injuries were shockingly worse than those of the others.

"Bones, in here, please! Dr Sevrin—Dr Sevrin. Look at him, Bones. How can he stand it?"

"He should be beamed aboard. He needs more attention than I can give him here."

"No!" Sevrin said suddenly. "No. We are not leaving."

"We'll take care of you aboard the ship," Kirk said.

"We are not leaving Eden. None of us."

"Be sensible, Sevrin."

"We're not leaving!" As Kirk bent to help him, Sevrin thrust him savagely aside, lunged for the door and ran, despite the agony it must have cost him. He plunged straight toward the huge fruit tree. There was no chance of stopping him; by the time Kirk and McCoy were out of the craft, he had reached the tree, seized a fruit and bitten into it

"No! I have found my Eden!"

Then he moaned, doubled, and fell.

The group by the shuttlecraft were for a moment paralyzed by shock. Then Chekov turned to Irina. "He too is dead, Irina."

She looked at him in a daze. "And the dream is dead. He sacrificed so much for it. When we landed, and he saw Eden finally, he cried, all of us felt the same. It was so beautiful. And we ran out into it—and…"

"Spock to *Enterprise.* Mr Scott, stand by to beam the injured aboard. Medical team to the Transporter Room."

Everything was normal again on the bridge. Uhura said, "I have Starbase now, Captain."

"Alert them that we have the four and will be beaming them down. And mark the incident closed."

"Yes, sir."

"Bridge to Transporter Room. Scotty, are they there?"

Three of them, sir."

"Stand by. Mr Chekov, do you wish to attend?"

Chekov stood hesitantly. "Captain, sir, I wish first to apologize for my conduct during this time. I—did not maintain myself under proper discipline. I endangered the ship and its personnel by my conduct. I respectfully submit myself for disciplinary action."

"Mr Chekov," Kirk said with a faint smile. "You did what you had to. As all of us did. Even your friends. You may go."

"Thank you, sir."

He started for the elevator, but as he did so, the doors opened and Irina stepped out. For a moment they looked at each other in silence.

"I was coming to say goodbye," Chekov said.

"And I was coming to say goodbye to you."

They kissed, gently, sadly. Irina said, "Be incorrect, occasionally."

"And you be correct."

"Occasionally."

She turned back to the elevator, but was intercepted by Spock. "Miss Galliulin, it is my sincere wish that you do not give up your search for Eden," he said. "I do not doubt but that you will find it—or make it yourselves."

She bowed her head, entered the elevator and was gone. Chekov and Spock went back to their posts. Chekov still seemed to be caught in the moment; then he became aware of the silence about him, the awareness of the others. He looked around.

Kirk was smiling faintly; he turned to Spock, whose face was expressionless, but who was nodding.

Kirk said, “We reach, Mr Chekov.”

REQUIEM FOR METHUSELAH

(Jerome Bixby)

Rigellian fever struck aboard the *Enterprise* with startling suddenness, its origin unknown. Permission was asked, and received, of Starfleet Command to abort the current routine mission in order to search for a planet with large deposits of ryetalyn, the only known cure for the disease. By the time they found such a planet, one yeoman had died and four more were seriously ill.

Kirk, McCoy and Spock beamed down at once, leaving Scott at the con. McCoy scanned about him with his tricorder.

"There's a large deposit at bearing two seven three—about a mile away," he reported, his voice grim. "We've got four hours to get it processed, or the epidemic will be irreversible. Everybody on the *Enterprise…*"

As he started off with Kirk, Spock's voice stopped them.

"Most strange," he said. "Readings indicate a life form in the vicinity. Yet our ship's sensors indicated that this planet was uninhabited."

"Human?" Kirk said. "But we've got no time for that. Let's get to that ryetalyn deposit."

Again they started off, and again they were halted by a sound—this time a steady whirring behind them. As they turned, they saw floating from behind a rock what could only be a robot: metallic, spherical, about the size of a beachball, studded with protuberances with functions which could only be guessed at. It came toward them at about chest height, flickering menacingly.

The three drew their phasers. A light blinked brightly on the robot's skin, and a bush next to Kirk went up in a burst of flame.

First Kirk and then the other two fired back—or tried to. All three phasers were inoperative. The robot continued to advance.

"Do not kill," a man's voice said. The robot stopped in midair. The owner of the voice came around from behind the same rock:

a muscular man of about forty, whose bearing suggested immense dignity, assurance, authority.

"Thanks," said Kirk with relief. "I am Captain James Kirk, of the…"

"I know who you are. I have monitored your ship since it entered this system."

"Then you know why we're here, Mr…"

"Flint. You will leave my planet."

"*Your* planet, sir?" Spock said.

"My retreat—from the unpleasantness of life on Earth—and the company of other people."

"Mr Flint, I've got a sick crew up there," Kirk said. "We can't possibly reach another planet in time. We're sorry to intrude. Well be happy to leave your little private world as soon as possible, but without that ryetalyn, you'd be condemning four hundred and thirty people to death!"

"You are trespassing, Captain."

"We're in *need.* We'll pay you for the ryetalyn—trade for it—work for it."

"You have nothing I want," Flint said.

"Nevertheless, we've got to have the ryetalyn. If necessary, we'll take it."

"If you do not leave voluntarily, I have the power to force you to leave—or kill you where you stand."

Kirk whipped out his communicator and snapped it open. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Mr Scott, lock phasers on landing party coordinates."

"Aye, Captain. All phasers locked on."

"If anything happens to us, there'll be *four* deaths," Kirk told Flint. "And my crew will come down and get the ryetalyn anyhow."

"It would be an interesting test of power," Flint said. "Your enormous forces—against mine. Who would win?"

"If you are not certain," Spock said, "I suggest you refrain from a most useless experiment."

"We need only a few hours," Kirk added.

"Have you ever seen a victim of Rigellian fever?" McCoy said. "It kills in one day. Its effects resemble bubonic plague."

Flint's expression turned remote. "Constantinople, Summer, 1334. It marched through the streets—the sewers. It left the city, by oxcart, by sea—to kill half of Europe. The rats—rustling and squealing in the night, as they, too, died…"

"You are a student of history, Mr Flint?" Spock asked.

"I am." He seemed to rouse himself. "The *Enterprise*—a plague ship. Well, you have two hours. At the end of that time, you will leave."

"With all due gratitude," Kirk said, rather drily. "Mr Spock, Bones…"

"No need," Flint said, indicating the robot. "M-4 will gather the ryetalyn you need. In the meantime, permit me to offer more comfortable surroundings."

"More comfortable" turned out to be a vast understatement. The central room of Flint's underground home was both huge and luxurious. Most impressive were the artworks—framed paintings, dozens or them, hung on the walls, except for one wall which was entirely taken up by books. There were statuary, busts, tapestries, illuminated glass cases containing open books and manuscripts of obvious antiquity, and even a concert grand piano. The place was warm, comfortable, masculine despite all these riches—at once both museum and home.

"Our ship's sensors did not reveal your presence here, Mr Flint," Spock said.

"My planet is surrounded by screens which create the impression of lifelessness. A protection against the curious—the uninvited."

"Such a home must be difficult to maintain."

"M-4 serves as butler, housekeeper, gardener—and guardian,"

McCoy was looking into the illuminated cases with obvious awe. "A Shakespeare First Folio—a Gutenberg Bible—the 'Creation' lithographs by Taranullus of Centaurus VII—some of the rarest books in the Galaxy—spanning centuries!"

"Make yourselves comfortable," Flint said. "Help yourselves to some brandy, gentlemen." He went out, calmly.

"Do we trust him?" McCoy asked.

"It would seem logical to do so—for the moment."

"I'll need two hours," McCoy said worriedly, "to process that ryetalyn into antitoxin."

"If the ryetalyn doesn't show up in one hour, we go prospecting," Kirk said. "Right over Mr Flint, if necessary."

Spock was now looking at the paintings. "This is the most splendid private art collection I have ever seen," he said. "And

unique. The majority are works of three men: Leonardo da Vinci of the sixteenth century, Reginald Pollock of the twentieth century, and even a Sten from Marcus II."

"And this," said McCoy, going over to the bar and picking up a bottle, "is Sirian brandy, a hundred years, old. Now where are the glasses? Ah. Jim? I know you won't have any, Spock. Heaven forbid that your mathematically perfect brainwaves be corrupted by this all too human vice."

"Thank you, Doctor. I will have brandy."

"Can the two of us handle a drunk Vulcan?" McCoy asked Kirk. "Once alcohol hits that green blood…"

"Nothing happens that I cannot control much more efficiently than you," Spock said, after a sip. "If I appear distracted, it is because of what I have seen. I am close to feeling an unaccustomed emotion."

"Let's drink to *that,*" McCoy said. "What emotion?"

"Envy. None of these da Vinci paintings has ever been catalogued or reproduced. They are *unknown* works. All are apparently authentic—to the last brushstroke and use of materials. As undiscovered da Vincis, they would be priceless."

"Would be?" Kirk said. "You think they might be fakes?"

"Most strange. A man of Flint's obvious wealth and impeccable taste would scarcely hang fakes. Yet my tricorder analysis indicates that the canvas and the pigments used are of contemporary origin."

"This could be what it seems to be," Kirk said thoughtfully. "Or it could be a cover—a setup—even an illusion."

"That could explain the paintings," McCoy said. "*Similar* to the real thing…"

"One of you, get a full tricorder scan of our host," Kirk said. "See if he's human."

"The minute he turns his back," McCoy agreed.

Kirk got out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Mr Scott, run a library check on this Mr Flint we've encountered here—and on this planet, Holberg 917-G. Stand by with results; I'll contact."

"Aye, sir."

"Kirk out. Now let's enjoy his brandy. It *tastes* real."

But as he lifted the glass to his lips, he once again heard the whirring of the robot, M-4. The men froze warily as the machine entered and moved toward them, stopping to hover over a large, low table. A front panel opened, and out came cubes of a whitish

material onto the table. The robot closed the panel and floated back a pace.

McCoy snatched up one of the cubes. "This looks like—it is! Ryetalyn! Refined—ready to be processed into antitoxin!"

"Whatever our host may be, he's come through," Kirk said. "McCoy, beam up to the ship and start processing."

"That will not be necessary," Flint said, appearing at the top of a ramp. "M-4 can prepare the ryetalyn for inoculation more quickly in my laboratory than you could aboard your ship."

"I'd like to supervise that, of course," McCoy said.

"And when you are satisfied as to procedures, I hope you will do me the honor of being my guests at dinner."

"Thank you, Mr Flint," Kirk said. "I'm afraid we don't have time."

Flint came a step down the ramp. "I regret my earlier inhospitality. Let me make amends." He half turned, extending a hand.

At the top of the ramp appeared a staggeringly beautiful girl in loosely flowing robes. She looked down at the, three strangers with a mixture of innocence and awe.

The two descended the ramp. The girl was graceful as well as lovely, yet she seemed quite unaware of the charm she radiated.

"I thought you lived alone, Mr Flint," Kirk said when he could get his voice back.

"No, this is the other member of the family. Gentlemen, may I present Rayna."

The courtesies were exchanged. Then Rayna said, "Mr Spock, I do hope we can find time to discuss inter-universal field densities, and their relationship to gravity vortex phenomena."

If Spock was as staggered as Kirk was by this speech, he did not show it. "Indeed? I should enjoy such a talk. It is an interest of mine."

"Her parents were killed in an accident, while in my employ," Flint explained. "Before dying, they placed their infant, Rayna Kapec, in my custody. I have raised and educated her."

"With impressive results, sir," McCoy said. "Rayna, what else interests you besides gravity vortex phenomena?"

"Everything. Less than that is betrayal of the intellect."

"The totality of the universe?" McCoy said gently. "All knowledge? Remember, there's more to life than knowing."

"Rayna possesses the equivalent of seventeen university degrees, in the sciences and arts," Flint said. "She is aware that the intellect is not all—but its development must come first, or the individual makes errors, wastes time in unprofitable pursuits."

"At her age, I rather enjoyed my errors," said McCoy. "But, no damage done, obviously, Rayna. You're the farthest thing from a bookworm I've ever seen."

"Flint is my teacher. You are the first other humans I have ever seen."

Kirk stared at her, not sure he liked what he had heard. But it was none of his business.

"The misfortune of men everywhere," McCoy was saying, "is our privilege."

Flint said, "If you would accompany my robot to the laboratory, Doctor, you can be assured that the processing of the ryetalyn is well in hand."

McCoy picked up the ryetalyn cubes and looked uncertainly at M-4. The robot turned silently in midair and glided out, the surgeon in tow.

"Your pleasure, gentlemen?" Flint said. "Chess? Billiards? Conversation?"

Kirk was still staring at Rayna. "Why not all three?" he said absently.

Kirk was no pool shark, and found Rayna far better at it than he was. He lined up a shot, intent. Flint and Spock watched.

Flint said, "I have surrounded Rayna with the beautiful and the good of human culture—its artistic riches and scientific wisdom."

Kirk muffed the shot.

"I have protected her from its venality—its savagery," Flint went on. "You see the result, Captain."

Rayna had lined up a three-cushion shot, which paid off brilliantly. Kirk straightened, feeling resigned.

"Did you teach her *that?*" he asked.

"We play often."

"May I show you, Captain?" Rayna said. She stepped close to him, correcting his grip on the cue.

"You said savagery, Mr Flint," Kirk said. "How long is it since you visited Earth?"

"You would tell me that it is no longer cruel. But it is, Captain. Look at your Starship—bristling with weapons…"

Kirk and Rayna were bending, close together, their arms intertwined on the cue as she set him up for the shot. He found that not much of his mind was on Flint.

"? its mission to colonize, exploit, destroy if necessary, to advance Federation causes."

Kirk made the shot. This time it was a pretty good one.

"Our missions are peaceful," he said, "our weapons defensive. If we were such barbarians, we would not have *asked* for the ryetalyn. Your greeting, not ours, lacked a certain benevolence.

"The result of pressures that are not your concern."

Spock had wandered over to the piano and sat down, studying the manuscript on the music rack.

"Such pressures are everywhere," Kirk said, "in every man, urging him to what you call savagery. The private hells—the inner needs and mysteries—the beast of instinct. As humans, we'll always be that way." He turned to Rayna, who seemed surprised that anyone would dare to argue with Flint. "To be human is to be complex. You can't escape a little ugliness, inside yourself and from without. It's part of the game."

Spock began casually to pick out the melody of the music manuscript. Flint looked toward him, seemingly struck by a sudden notion, "Why not play the waltz, Mr Spock?" He turned to Kirk. 'To be human is also to seek pleasure. To laugh—to dance; Rayna is a most accomplished dancer."

Sight-reading, Spock began to play. Kirk looked at Rayna. "May I have the pleasure?"

She went into his arms. The first few steps were, clumsy, for Kirk was somewhat out of practice, but she was easy to lead. She was wearing a half smile of seeming curiosity. Flint watched them both, outwardly paternal, but also speculatively.

Spock was doing very well, considering that the manuscript looked hastily written; but there was something in his intentness that suggested more than mere concentration on the problems of reading the notation.

As Kirk and Rayna whirled past Flint, she gave Flint a bright, pleased smile, more animated than any expression she had shown before. Flint returned the smile with apparent affection—but there was still that intent speculation underneath.

Then McCoy entered, looking very grim indeed. Spock stopped playing, and the dancing couple broke apart.

"Something wrong?" Kirk asked.

"Nothing to dance about. The ryetalyn is no good! We can't use it. It contains irillium—nearly one part per thousand."

"Irillium would make the antitoxin inert?" Spock said.

"Right. Useless."

"Most unfortunate that it was not detected," Flint said. "I shall go with M-4 to gather more ryetalyn and screen it myself. You are welcome to join me, Doctor." He went out, evidently to summon the robot.

"Time factor, McCoy?" Kirk said. "The epidemic?"

"A little over two hours and a half. I guess we can get in under the wire. I've never seen anything like the robot's speed, Jim. It would take us twice as long to process the stuff."

"Would we have made the error?" Kirk asked grimly.

"*I* made the error, just as much as the robot. I didn't suspect the contaminant until scanning the completed antitoxin showed it up. What if all the ryetalyn on this planet contains irillium?"

"Go with Flint. Keep an eye on procedures."

"Like a hawk," McCoy said, turning away. "That lab's an extraordinary place, Jim. You and Spock should have a look."

He went up the ramp after Flint. Spock got up from the piano bench, picking up the manuscript.

"Something else which is extraordinary," he said. "This waltz I played is by Johannes Brahms. But it is in manuscript, Captain—written in Brahms' own hand, which I recognize. It is an unknown waltz—absolutely the work of Brahms—but unknown."

"Later, Mr Spock," Kirk said, preoccupied. "I think I will take a look at that laboratory. All our lives depend upon it. If we could get the irillium out of the existing antitoxin… Where did Rayna go?"

"I did not see her leave, Captain. I was intent upon…"

"All right. Stay here. Let me know when McCoy and Flint return."

Spock nodded and sat down again at the piano. As Kirk went up the ramp, the strains of the waltz began to sound again behind him.

He found the laboratory without difficulty, and it was indeed a wonder, an orderly mass of devices only a few of which looked even vaguely familiar. What use did Flint ordinarily have for such an installation? It implied research work of a high order and constantly pursued. Was there no limit to the man's intellectual resources?

Then Kirk realized that he was not alone. Rayna was standing on the other side of the lab, before another door. Her hands were clasped before her and her eyes were raised in an attitude of meditation, or of questioning for which she could not find the words. But she seemed also to be trembling slightly.

Kirk went to her, and she turned her head. Yes, she was shivering.

"You left us," Kirk said. The room became lonely."

"Lonely? I do not know the word."

"It is a condition of wanting someone else. It is like a thirst—like a flower dying in a desert." Kirk halted, surprised at his own outburst of imagery. His eyes looked past her to the door. "What's in there?"

"I do not know. Flint has told me I must never enter. He denies me nothing else."

"Then—why are you here?"

"I—do not know. I come to this place when I am troubled—when I would search myself."

"Are you troubled now?"

"Yes."

"By what?" She looked intently and searchingly into his eyes, but did not answer. "Are you happy here, with Flint?"

"He is the greatest, kindest, wisest man in the Galaxy."

"Then why are you afraid? You *are* afraid; I can see it." He put his arms around her protectively. The trembling did not stop. "Rayna, this place is cold. Think of something far away. A perfect, safe, idyllic world—your presence would make it so. A world that children dream of…"

"Did I dream? My childhood—I remember this year—last year…"

What had Flint done to this innocent? He felt his expression hardening. She looked bewildered. "Don't be afraid," he said gently. He kissed her. It was meant to be only a brotherly kiss, but when he drew back, he found that he was profoundly shaken. He bent his head to kiss her more thoroughly.

As he did, her gaze flashed over his shoulder, and her eyes widened with horror. "No!" she cried. "No, no!"

Kirk whirled, belatedly aware of the whirring of the robot. The machine was floating toward him, lights flashing ominously. He put himself between the robot and the girl. It advanced inexorably, and he backed a step, trying to lead it away from Rayna.

"Stop!" Rayna cried. "*Stop!*"

M-4 did not stop. Kirk, backtracking, ducked behind a large machine and pulled out his phaser; when the robot appeared, he fired point-blank. As he had more than half expected, the weapon failed to work.

"Stop! Command! *Command!*"

Steadily, the robot backed Kirk into a corner. He braced himself to rush it—futile, without doubt, but there was no other choice.

Then there was the hissing snap of a phaser, and the robot vanished.

Spock appeared from around the corner of the massive machine where Kirk had tried to ambush M-4, stowing his phaser.

"Whew," Kirk said. "Thank you, Mr Spock."

"Fortunately the robot was too intent on you to deactivate my phaser," Spock said. "Dr McCoy and Mr Flint have returned with the ryetalyn."

Was Rayna all right? Kirk went to her. She seemed unharmed. Suddenly she lifted a hand to touch his lips. Then she turned away, wide-eyed, deep in troubled thoughts.

They were back in the central room—Spock, Rayna, and a very angry Kirk. Flint was quite calm. Behind his back, Spock had his tricorder out and aimed at him.

"M-4 was programmed to defend this household, and its members," Flint said calmly. "No doubt I should have altered its instructions, to allow for unauthorized but predictable actions on your part. It thought you were attacking Rayna. A misinterpretation."

Kirk was far from sure he bought that explanation. He took a step toward Flint.

"If it was around now, it might interpret quite correctly…"

Whirrrr.

The machine was back—or an exact duplicate of it, floating watchfully near Flint.

"Too useful a device to be without, really," Flint said. "I created another. Go to the laboratory, M-5."

Spock stowed his tricorder over his shoulder. "Matter from energy," he said. "An almost instantaneous manufacture, no doubt, in which your robot was duplicated from an existing matrix."

Flint nodded, but he did not take his eyes from Kirk.

"Be thankful that you did not attack me, Captain. I might have accepted battle—and I have twice your physical strength."

"In your own words, that might be an interesting test of power."

"How childish he is, Rayna. Would you call him brave—or a fool?"

"I am glad he did not die," Rayna said in a low voice.

"Of course. Death, when unnecessary, is tragic. Captain, Dr McCoy is in the laboratory with the new ryetalyn. He is satisfied as to its purity. I suggest that you wait here, patiently—safely. You have seen that my defense systems operate automatically—and not always in accordance with my wishes."

Kirk felt a certain lack of conviction about this last clause.

Flint put his hand on Rayna's arm. "Come, Rayna."

After a last, long look at Kirk, she allowed herself to be led up the ramp. Scowling, Kirk took a stubborn step after them, but Spock held him back.

"I don't like the way he orders her around," Kirk said.

"Since we are dependent upon Mr Flint for the ryetalyn, I might respectfully suggest, Captain, that you pay less attention to the young lady, should you encounter her again. Our host's interests do not appear to be confined to art and science."

"He loves her?" Kirk said.

"Strongly indicated."

"Jealousy! That could explain the attack. But still—he seemed to *want* us to be together; the billiards game—*he* suggested that we dance…"

"It would seem to defy the logic of the human male, as I understand it."

After an uneasy moment, Kirk brought out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Mr Scott, report on the Rigellian fever."

"Nearly everybody aboard has got it, sir. We're working a skeleton crew, and waiting for the antitoxin."

"A little while longer, Scotty. Report on computer search."

"No record of Mr Flint. He simply seems to have no past. The planet was purchased thirty years ago by a Mr Nova, a wealthy financier and recluse."

"Run a check on Rayna Kapec. Status: legal ward, after death of parents."

"Aye, Captain."

As Kirk slowly put the communicator away, Spock said, "There is still a greater mystery. I was able to secure a tricorder scan of Mr Flint, while you and he were involved in belligerence. He is human. But there are bio-physical peculiarities. Certain body-function readings are disproportionate. For one thing, extreme age is indicated—on the order of six thousand years."

"Six thousand! He doesn't look it, not by a couple of decimal places. Can you confirm that, Mr Spock?"

"I shall program the readings into Dr McCoy's medical computer when we return to the ship."

"Time factor?"

"We must commence antitoxin injections within two hours and eighteen minutes, or the epidemic will prove fatal to us all."

Kirk frowned. "Why is the processing taking so long this time?"

"The delay would seem to be possibly deliberate."

"Yes," Kirk said grimly. "As if he were keeping us here for some reason."

"Most strange. While Mr Flint seems to wish us to linger, he is apprehensive. It is logical to assume that he knows our every move—that he has us monitored."

The communicator beeped. "Kirk here."

"Scott, sir. There's no record of a Rayna Kapec in the Federation legal banks."

"No award of custody?"

"No background on her at all, in any computer bank. Like Flint."

"Thanks, Scotty. Kirk out. Like Flint. People without a past. By what authority is she here, then? What hold does he have over her?"

"I would suggest," Spock said, "that our immediate concern is the ryetalyn."

"Let's find McCoy."

As they headed for the door, Rayna entered. She seemed to be agitated. "Captain!" she called.

"Go ahead, Spock, I'll meet you in the laboratory."

When they were alone, Rayna said, "I have come to say goodbye."

"I don't want to say goodbye."

"I am glad that you will live."

Kirk studied her. She seemed innocent, uncertain, yet underneath there was a kind of urgency. She stood motionless, as

if in the grip of farces she did not understand.

He went to her. "I know now *why* I have lived." He put his arms around her and kissed her. This second kiss was much longer than the first, and her response suddenly lost its innocence.

"Come with us," Kirk said hoarsely.

"My place…"

"Is where you want to be. Where do you want to be?"

"With you."

"Always."

"Here," she said.

"No, come with me. I promise you happiness."

"I have known security here."

"Childhood ends. You love *me,* not Flint."

For a long moment she was absolutely silent, hardly even seemed to breathe. Then she broke free of his arms and ran off. Kirk stared after her, and then started off to the laboratory, his heart still pounding.

The moment Kirk entered, McCoy said, "Flint lied to us. The ryetalyn isn't here."

"But I am picking up readings on the tricorder, Captain," Spock said. "The ryetalin is apparently behind that door."

The door toward which the tricorder was aimed was the same one Rayna had said Flint had forbidden her to enter.

"Why is Flint playing tricks on us?" Kirk demanded, suddenly furious at the constant multiplication of mysteries. "Apparently we're supposed to go in and get it—if we can! Let's not disappoint the chessmaster. Phasers on full!"

But as the weapons came out, the door began to rumble open of its own accord. A constant, low hum of power was audible from inside it.

Kirk lead the way. The ryetalyn cubes were conspicuously visible on a table. Kirk went toward them in triumph, but his attention was caught by a draped body encased on a slab. The slab carried a sign which read: "RAYNA 16."

The body was the supine form of a woman. The face was not quite human; it resembled dead white clay, beautifully sculptured and somehow unfinished. Nevertheless, it was clearly Rayna's.

Hung on the other side of the case was a clipboard with notes attached. Most of the scribbles seemed to be mathematical.

As if in a dream, Kirk moved on to a similar case. The figure in it was less finished than the first. Its face seemed to show marks of sculpture; the features were more crudely defined. Still, it too was Rayna's—RAYNA 17.

"Physically human," McCoy said in a low voice, "yet not human. These are earlier versions. Jim—she's an android!"

"Created here, by my hand," Flint's voice said from the doorway. "Here, the centuries of loneliness were to end."

"Centuries?" Kirk said.

"Your collection of Leonardo da Vinci masterpieces, Mr Flint," Spock said. "Many appear to have been recently painted—on contemporary canvas, with contemporary materials. And on your piano, a waltz by Johannes Brahms, an unknown work, in manuscript, written with modern ink—yet absolutely authentic, as are the paintings…"

"I am Brahms," Flint said.

"And da Vinci"

"Yes."

"How many other names shall we call you?" Spock asked.

"Solomon, Alexander, Lazarus, Methuselah, Merlin, Abramson—a hundred other names you do not know."

"You were born… ?"

"In that region of Earth later called Mesopotamia—in the year 3034 b.c., as the millennia are now reckoned. I was Akharin—a soldier, a bully and a fool. I fell in battle, pierced to the heart—and did not die."

"A mutation," McCoy said, fascinated. "Instant tissue regeneration—and apparently a perfect, unchanging balance between anabolism and katabolism. You learned you were immortal…"

"And to conceal it: to settle and live some portion of a life; to pretend to age—and then move on, before my nature was suspected. One night I would vanish, or fake my demise."

"Your wealth, your intellect, the product of centuries of study and acquisition," Spock said. "You knew the greatest minds of history…"

"Galileo," Flint said. "Moses. Socrates. Jesus. And I have married a hundred times. Selected, loved, cherished—caressed a smoothness, inhaled a brief fragrance—then age, death, the taste of dust. Do you understand?"

"You wanted a perfect woman," Spock said. "An ultimate woman, as brilliant, as immortal, as yourself. Your mate for all time."

"Designed by my heart," Flint said. "I could not love her more."

"Spock," Kirk whispered, "you knew."

"Readings were not decisive. However, Mr Flint's, choice of a planet rich in ryetalyn—I had hoped I was wrong."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Kirk asked harshly.

"What would you have said?"

"That you were wrong," Kirk said, "*wrong.* Yes, I see."

"You met perfection," Flint said. "Helplessly, you loved it. But you cannot love an android, Captain. I love her; she is my handiwork—my property—she is what I desire."

"And you put the ryetalyn in here to teach me this," Kirk said. "Does she know?"

"She will never know."

Kirk said tiredly, "Let's go, Mr Spock."

"You will stay," Flint said.

"Why?"

"We have also learned what *he* is, Captain."

"Yes," said Flint. "If you leave, the curious would follow—the foolish, the meddlers, the officials, the seekers. My privacy was my own; its invasion be on your head."

"We can remain silent," Spock suggested.

"The disaster of intervention, Mr Spock. I've known it—I will not risk it again." Flint's hand went to a small control box on his belt.

Kirk whipped out his communicator. Flint smiled, almost sadly. "They cannot answer, Captain. See."

A column of swirling light began to form slowly in a clear area of the life chamber. As it brightened, the form of the *Enterprise* was revealed, floating a few feet above the floor, tiny familiar lights blinking.

"No!" Kirk cried.

"The test of power," Flint said "You had no chance."

"My crew…"

"It is time for you to join them."

Kirk felt sick. "You'd—wipe out—four hundred lives? Why?"

"I have seen a hundred million fall. I know Death better than any man; I have tossed enemies into his grasp. But I know mercy.

Your crew is not dead, but suspended."

"Worse than dead," Kirk said savagely. "Restore them! Restore my ship!"

"In time. A thousand—two thousand years. You will see the future, Captain Kirk." Flint looked at the *Enterprise.* "A fine instrument. Perhaps I may learn something from it."

"You have been such men?" Kirk said. "Known and created such beauty? Watched your race evolve from cruelty and barbarism, throughout your enormous life! Yet now, you would do *this* to us?"

"The flowers of my past. I hold the nettles of the present. I am Flint—with my needs."

"What needs?"

"Tonight I have seen—something wondrous. Something I have waited for—labored for. Nothing must endanger it. At last, Rayna's emotions have stirred to life. Now they will turn to me, in this solitude which I preserve."

"*No,*" said Rayna's voice. They all spun around.

"Rayna!" Flint said in astonishment. "How much have you heard?"

"You must not do this to them!"

"I must." Flint's hand moved implacably back to the belt device.

"Rayna," Spock said. "*What will you feel for him—when we are gone?*"

She did not reply, but the expression of betrayal, tragedy, and bitter hatred which she turned on Flint was answer enough.

All emotions are engaged, Mr Flint," Spock said. "Harm us, and she hates you."

"Give me my ship," Kirk said coldly. "Your secret is safe with us."

Flint looked at Kirk levelly. Then there was the slightest suggestion of a shrug; here was a man who had lost battles before. He touched the belt control again.

The column of light with the toy *Enterprise* in it faded and vanished.

"That's why you delayed processing the ryetalyn," Kirk said, in a low, bitter voice. "You realized what was happening. You kept us together—me, Rayna—because I could make her emotions come alive. Now you're going to just take over!"

"I shall take what is mine—when she comes to me," Flint said. "We are mated, Captain. Alike immortal. You must forget your feelings in this matter, which is quite impossible for you."

"Impossible from the beginning," Kirk said in growing fury. "Yet you used me. I can't love her—but I do love her! And *she loves me!*"

Flint sprang. He was quick, but Kirk evaded him. The two combatants began circling like animals. As Kirk passed Spock, the First Officer seized his arm.

"Your primitive impulses cannot alter the situation."

"*You* wouldn't understand! We're fighting over a woman!"

"You are *not,*" Spock said, "for *she* is not."

Kirk stepped back, turning his pains out toward his adversary. "Pointless, Mr Flint."

"I will not be the cause of all this," Rayna said, in a voice both fiery and shaken. "I will not! I choose! I choose! Where I want to go—what I want to do! *I choose!*"

"I choose for you," Flint said.

"No longer!"

"Rayna…"

"No. Don't order me! *No* one can order me!"

Kirk looked at her in awe, and it seemed as though Flint was feeling the same sensation. He extended a hand toward her, and she turned from it. He dropped the hand slowly, staring at her.

"She's human," Kirk said. "Down to the last blood cell, she's human. Down to the last thought, hope, aspiration, emotion. You and I have created human life—and the human spirit is free. You have no power of ownership. She can do as she wishes."

"No man beats me," Flint said coldly.

"I don't want to beat you," Kirk said wearily. "There's no test of power here. Rayna belongs to herself now. She claims her human right of choice—to do as she will, think as she will, *be* as she will."

Finally Flint gave a tired nod. "I have fought for that also. What does she choose?"

"Come with me," Kirk said to her.

"Stay," said Flint.

There were tears in her eyes. "I was not human," she whispered. "Now, I love—I love…"

She moved slowly forward toward the two waiting men. She seemed exhausted. She stumbled once, and then, suddenly, fell.

McCoy was at her side in an instant, feeling for her pulse. Flint also knelt. Slowly, McCoy shook his head.

It hit Kirk like a blow in the stomach. "What—happened?" he asked.

"She loved you, Captain," Spock said gently, "and also Flint, as a mentor, even a father. There was not time enough to adjust to the awful powers and contradictions of her newfound emotions. She could not bear to hurt either of you. The joy of love made her human; its agony destroyed her." In his voice there was a note of calm accusation. "The hand of God was duplicated. A life was created. But then—you demanded ideal response—for which God still waits."

Flint bowed his head, a broken man. "You can't die, we will live forever—together." He sobbed. "Rayna—*child…*"

Kirk's hand moved, almost blindly, to his shoulder.

Kirk sat at his desk in his own cabin, in half light, exhausted, brooding. The door opened and Spock came in.

"Spock," Kirk said, and looked away.

"The epidemic is reduced and no longer a threat. The *Enterprise is* on course 513 mark seven, as you ordered."

"The very young and lonely man—the very old and lonely man—we put on a pretty poor show, didn't we?" He bowed his head. "If only I could forget…"

His head went down on his arms. He was asleep.

McCoy entered in full cry. "Jim, those tricorder readings of Mr Flint are finally correlated. Methuselah is dying…"

Then he noticed Kirk's position, and added in a low voice, "Thank Heaven—sleeping at last."

"Your report, Doctor?" Spock said.

"Flint. In leaving Earth; with its complex of fields in which he was formed and with which he was in perfect balance, he sacrificed immortality. He'll live the remainder of a normal life-span—and die."

"That day, I shall mourn. Does he know?"

"I told him myself. He intends to devote his last years, and his gigantic abilities, to improving the human condition. Who knows what he might come up with?"

"Indeed," Spock said.

"That's all, I guess. I'll tell Jim when he wakes up, or you can." He looked at Kirk with deep sympathy. "Considering his opponent's

longevity—truly an eternal triangle. You wouldn't understand, would you, Spock? I'm sorrier for you than I am for him. You'll never know the things love can drive a man to—the ecstasies, the miseries, the broken rules, the desperate chances—the glorious failures, and the glorious victories—because the word love isn't written in your book."

Spock was silent.

"I wish he could forget her." Still silence. "Good night, Spock."

"Good night, Doctor."

Spock regarded Kirk for another silent moment, and then moved deliberately to lock the door behind McCoy, Then he returned to Kirk. His hands floated to Kirk's dropped head, fingertips touching. He said, very gently, "*Forget…*"

THE SAVAGE CURTAIN

(Gene Roddenberry and Arthur Heinemann)

The planet, newly discovered in an uncharted area of space, was clearly not a Class M world. The atmosphere boiled with poisonous reds and greens; the surface was molten lava.

And yet, from one small area Spock picked up persistent readings of carbon cycle life forms—and artificial power being generated in quantities great enough to support a considerable civilization. Hailing on all frequencies at first produced nothing… and then, suddenly, the *Enterprise* was being scanned, an incredibly swift and deep probe.

Kirk barely had time to call for alert status when the probing was over. Almost immediately afterward, the image of the planet on the main viewing screen dissolved into a swirling jumble of colors. These slowly gathered together into a face and figure, entirely human, dressed in clothing like those worn in the mid-1800's on Earth. He was sitting on nothing and with nothing visible behind him, as though in limbo. His expression was benign and calm.

"Captain Kirk, I believe?" the figure said. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir."

Kirk, Spock and McCoy stared incredulously at the familiar figure. Finally, Kirk motioned to Uhura.

"Your voice-telegraph device is quite unnecessary, Captain," the figure said. "Do I gather that you recognize me?"

"I… recognize what you appear to be."

"And appearances can be quite deceiving." The figure smiled. "But not in this case, James Kirk. I am Abraham Lincoln."

Kirk considered this incredible claim and apparition, and then turned to his First Officer. "Spock?"

"Fascinating, Captain."

"I've been described in many ways, Mr Spock," the smiling man said, "but never with that word."

"I was requesting your analysis of this, Mr Spock."

"They did scan us and our vessel," Spock said, "and doubtless obtained sufficient information to present this illusion."

"Illusion?" the figure said. "Captain, will you permit me to come aboard your vessel? No doubt you have devices which can test my reality."

After a moment's hesitation, Kirk said, "We'd be honored to have you aboard, Mr President."

The figure reached into its vest pocket, pulled out a large watch on a heavy gold chain and snapped the lid open. "Do you still measure time in minutes?"

"Yes, sir."

Then you should be over my position in… twelve and a half minutes. Until then, Captain…" The image on the screen rippled, dissolved and re-formed itself as the planet. Amid the hot reds and poisonous greens of the atmosphere there was now a spot of soft blue. Spock leaned into his hooded viewer.

"An area of approximately a thousand square kilometers, sir," he said. "It's completely Earthlike, including an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere."

"He called it to the second, sir," Chekov added. "We'll be over it in exactly twelve minutes now."

Kirk touched the intercom button. "Security. Send a detachment to the Transport Room immediately. Phaser side arms—but be prepared also to give presidential honors. Captain out."

"Jim," McCoy said, "you don't really believe he's Abraham Lincoln?"

"It's obvious he believes it, Bones." Kirk stood up. "Mr Spock, Doctor, full dress uniforms, please. Mr Sulu, the con is yours."

In the Transporter Room, Security Chief Dickenson had assembled two security guards, phasers at port. Dickenson himself sported white boots and belt, plus a traditional bos'n's whistle on a gold chain.

Engineering Officer Scott, in full kilt, entered and moved to the Transporter console, fuming. "Full dress! Presidential honors! What's all this nonsense, Mr Dickenson?"

"I understand President Lincoln is coming aboard, sir."

Scott whirled. "Are you daft, man?"

"All I know, sir, is what the Captain tells me, sir," Dickenson said uncomfortably. "And he said he'd have the hide of the first man

who so much as smiles."

McCoy entered, also in full dress, with his tricorder over his shoulder. Scott eyed him dourly; McCoy gave back stare for stare.

"I'd have expected sanity from the ship's surgeon, at least." Scott irritably punched controls on the console. "President Lincoln, indeed! No doubt followed by Louis of France and Robert the Bruce."

Kirk and Spock had come in in time to catch this last remark.

"And if so, Mr Scott, we'll execute appropriate honors to each," Kirk said. "Gentlemen, I don't believe for a moment that Abraham Lincoln is actually coming aboard. But we are dealing with an unknown and apparently quite advanced life form. Until we know… well, when in Rome, we do as the Romans do."

"Bridge to Transporter Room," Chekov's voice said over the intercom. "One minute to overhead position."

"Locking onto something," Scott said. He looked closer, and then gestured at the panel. "Does that appear human to you, Mr Spock?"

Spock joined him and inspected the console. "Fascinating!… For a moment it appeared almost mineral. Like living rock, with heavy fore-claws… Settling down into completely human readings now."

"We can beam it aboard any time now, Captain," Scott said.

"Set for traditional ruffles and flourishes. Security, stand ready."

"Phaser team, set for heavy stun," Dickenson said. "Honor guard, ready."

The two security men posted themselves on opposite sides of the Transporter chamber, weapons set, raised and aimed. The four men comprising the honor guard snapped into parade rest. Dickenson raised his whistle to his lips.

"Energize."

The sparkling column appeared, solidified, vanished. The figure left standing there seemed to be inarguably Abraham Lincoln, dressed in the well-remembered 19th century suit, bearded, his face registering the sad wisdom of his presidential years.

Dickenson blew his whistle. Spock pushed a panel button and everyone came to attention. Ruffles and flourishes filled the air.

"Salute!" Kirk said. Everyone did except the two guards, whose phasers remained ready. Lincoln, too, stood gravely at attention through the music. Then Kirk said, "Two!," broke the salute and stepped forward.

"The USS *Enterprise* is honored to have you aboard, Mr President."

"Strange," Lincoln said, stepping down. "Where are the musicians?"

"Taped music, sir. Starships on detached service do not carry full honor detachments."

"Taped music? Perhaps Mr Spock will be good enough to explain that to me later." Lincoln extended a hand to Kirk. "A most interesting way to come aboard, Captain. What was the device used?"

"A matter-energy scrambler sir. The molecules of your body were converted to energy, and beamed to this chamber where they were reconverted to their original pattern."

Lincoln hesitated. "Well, since I am obviously here and quite whole, whatever you mean apparently works very well indeed." He looked at the two guards. "If those are weapons, gentlemen, you may lower them. At my age, I'm afraid I'm not very dangerous."

"Readings, fully human, sir," McCoy said.

Kirk signaled the guards to holster their weapons, and then introduced everyone present.

"Please stand at ease, gentlemen," Lincoln said. "I hope to talk to each of you, but meanwhile, your Captain is consumed with questions and I shall do my utmost to answer them. And I trust your duties will permit time to answer some of mine. At your service, Captain."

"Mr Spock." Kirk led his First Officer and his guest off toward the Briefing Room.

"A marvel," Lincoln said. "A total marvel. I can hardly credit my eyes. We thought our *Monitor* the most formidable vessel imaginable—an iron ship that floated on water! You can imagine my amazement at an iron ship that floats on air."

"Mr President—"

"Yes, Captain. Forgive my excitement at the novelty of all this."

"Sir… I find some of your comments hard to equate with other statements. For example, you are not at all surprised at the existence of this vessel. But you then exhibit only a 19th century knowledge about it—for example, stating that this vessel 'floats on air.' "

"I don't understand. What *does* your vessel float on, Captain?"

Kirk exchanged a look with Spock and said patiently, "Sir, the atmosphere surrounding any planet is a relatively thin envelope."

Lincoln appeared genuinely puzzled. Spock went on: "Given our present altitude, sir, and a present speed converting to 19,271 Earth miles per Earth hour, our velocity counterbalances the pull of this planet's gravity, creating equal but opposite forces which maintain us in orbit."

This was quite a distance away from the real physical situation, but Spock had evidently decided to choose terms which might be familiar to a 19th century educated man, rather than having to explain what was meant by free fall through a matter-distorted space-time matrix. But even the simplification did not work.

"When the choice is between honesty and disguising ignorance," Lincoln said, "a wise man chooses the former. I haven't the faintest idea what you said."

"With all respect, sir, that still does not answer my question," Kirk said. "For example, you knew my name. How is it you know some things about us but not others?"

"Bless me! Yes, I do see the contradiction," Lincoln said, frowning. "Please believe I have neither desire nor intention to deceive you, gentlemen. I must have been told these things, but I… I cannot recall when or where."

"Can you guess who it might have been, sir?" Spock said. "What others exist on the planet's surface with you?"

"Others? What others do you mean?"

"That's clearly not Earth down there, Mr President," Kirk said. "Or do you believe that it is?"

"Strange," Lincoln said thoughtfully, "I never considered that before. No, I do not claim it to be Earth."

"Less than thirty minutes ago, the temperature and atmosphere at any point down there would have made your existence in this form impossible."

"You don't say! I can only assure you that I am what I appear to be, gentlemen: an all too common variety of *Homo sapiens.* Either way, I am too ordinary, James. I am surprised you've always thought so highly of me. The errors, the unforgivable errors I made. McClellan at first appeared to me a veritable Napoleon; Grant seemed a whisky-befuddled barbarian…" He shook his head. "There were so many things I could have done to end the war earlier, to save so many lives, so much suffering…"

"I'm sure you did all you could—"

"Why do you stop, James? Afraid of showing compassion? It is the noblest of qualities… I am certain there is an answer to these contradictions you point up so well." His frown suddenly dissolved. "Yes, that's it, of course. You are both invited to disembark with me. You will receive the answers down there. There is no need to hurry your decision, Captain. I am most anxious to inspect a vessel which at least *appears* to float on air."

"We shall be honored," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, inform the others. We'll consider this in the Briefing Room in one hour."

Lincoln looked around again. "Fascinating!" he said to Spock, smiling. "If I may borrow your favorite word."

"I'm flattered, sir."

"The smile lends attraction to your features, Mr Spock."

Kirk turned, but Spock's face was as stony as always. I'm afraid you're mistaken, sir," Kirk said. "Mr Spock never smiles."

"Indeed?" Lincoln offered no further comment. Had he seen something behind Spock's expression? It would be in character.

They went up to the bridge, where the main viewing screen still showed a segment of the planet below them. Lincoln stared at it in awe, while Sulu and Chekov stared at him.

"Good Lord!"

"As I recall," Kirk said, "your Union Army observation balloons were tethered six hundred or so feet high, sir. We're six hundred forty-three miles above this planet."

"You can measure great distances that closely?"

"We do, sir," Spock said, moving to his station and checking his instruments. "Six hundred forty-three miles, two thousand twenty-one feet, two point zero four inches at this moment, in your old-style measurement."

"Bless me."

Uhura came onto the bridge. "Excuse me, Captain—"

"What a charming Negress," Lincoln said, then added quickly, "Oh, forgive me, my dear. I know that in my day some used that term as a description of property."

"Why should I object to the term, sir?" Uhura said, smiling. In our century, we've learned not to fear words."

Kirk said, "May I present our communications officer, Lt. Uhura."

Lincoln shook hands with her, returning the smile. "The foolishness of my own century had me apologizing where no offense was given."

"Actually," she said, "I feel my color much lovelier and superior to yours and the Captain's."

"Superior? Then some of the old problems still exist?"

"No, sir," Kirk said. "It's just that we've learned to each be delighted in what we are. The Vulcans learned that centuries before we did."

"It's basic to the Vulcan philosophy, sir," Spock said. "How an infinite variety of things combine to make existence worthwhile."

"Yes, of course," Lincoln said. "The philosophy of 'nome'—meaning 'all.' " He paused, his frown returning. "Now, how did I know that? Just as I seem to know that on the planet's surface you will meet one of the greatest Vulcans in all the long history of your planet My mind does not hold the name. But I know that he will be there."

"Excuse me, Captain," Uhura said, "but Mr Scott is waiting for you in the Briefing Room."

"Oh, yes. Mr President with your permission I should like to make Lt. Uhura your guide at this point; I have a meeting."

"I would be delighted."

"Then well rejoin you shortly, sir. Mr Sulu, the con is yours until Mr Scott returns to the bridge."

In the Briefing Room, as Kirk and Spock entered, McCoy was saying to Spock: "Where the devil are they?"

"Perhaps looking up a plate of haggis in the galley? They've been everywhere else."

"Sorry, gentlemen," Kirk said, crossing to the table. "We were delayed."

"Jim, I'd be the last to advise you on your command image—"

"I doubt that, Bones, but continue."

"Do I have to lay it out for you? Practically the entire crew has seen you treating this imposter like the real thing—when he can't possibly be the real article, Captain!"

"Lincoln died three centuries ago and more, on a planet hundreds of light years away." Scott jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"More in that direction, Engineer," Spock said, pointing down and to the left.

"The exact direction doesn't matter, you pointed-eared hobgoblin! You're the Science Officer," added McCoy, "why aren't you—well, doing whatever Science Officers do at a time like this?"

"I am, Doctor. I am observing the alien."

"At last. At least someone agrees with us he's an alien."

"Yes, he's an alien, of course," Kirk said after a moment's hesitation.

"And potentially dangerous," McCoy pressed on.

"Mad!" said Scott "Loony as an Arcturian dog-bird."

"Spock and I have been invited to beam down to the planet's surface with him. Comments on that?"

"A big one," McCoy said. "Suddenly, miraculously, we see a small spot of Earth-type environment appear down there. Is it really there or do we just think we see it there?"

"You could beam down into a sea of molten lava," Scott said. "At the moment it's a raftlike mineral crust several hundred meters thick, over a molten iron core. It looks stable, but it was notably unstable in its formative phase."

"And there are transient images of life forms," McCoy said. "Minerallike themselves. Jim, that patch of Earth was created after our ship was scanned. Whoever they are, they examined us, determined our needs and supplied them down there. It smells, Captain. It's a trap."

"But why would they want to destroy only two of us?" Kirk said.

"It would be illogical of them, with such abilities," Spock said. "They could as easily trick us into destroying the entire vessel."

"Spock, are you implying that it's probably safe to beam down?"

"I am not, Doctor. There's no doubt that they want us down there for some hidden purpose. Otherwise they would have revealed some logical reason for all of this."

"Why Lincoln, Spock?" Kirk said. "Any speculation on that?"

"I need not speculate when the reason is obvious, Captain. President Lincoln has always been a very personal hero to you. What better way to titillate your curiosity than to make him come alive for you?"

"Not only to me, Spock."

"Agreed. I felt his charm, too. He is a magnificent work of duplication."

"But he has a *special* emotional involvement for you," McCoy said. "Interesting, since you're the one who will make the decision whether or not to beam down."

"Don't do it, Captain," Scott said.

Kirk thought about it. Finally he said, "The very reason for the existence of our starships is contact with other life. Although the method is beyond our comprehension, we *have* been offered contact. I'm beaming down. As for you, however, Mr Spock—"

Spock stood. "Since I was included in their invitation to make contact, I must beam down with you, Captain."

McCoy exploded. "You're both out of your heads!"

"And you're on the edge of insubordination, Doctor," Kirk said.

"Would I be insubordinate to remind the Captain that this has the smell of things happening to him which I may not be able to patch back together this time?"

"Aye," Scott growled.

"Your concern noted and appreciated, gentlemen," Kirk said. "Mr Spock, standard uniform, phasers and tricorder. Mr Scott, have President Lincoln guided to the Transporter Room; we'll beam down immediately."

The three materialized in what seemed to be a wild canyon. The slopes were steep and boulder-strewn; on the floors there were shrubbery and trees. Kirk looked around.

"Captain!" Spock said. "Our weapons and tricorders did not beam down,"

Kirk reached under his shirt and found his communicator still there, although his phaser and tricorder had indeed vanished. "Captain to *Enterprise,* come in… *Enterprise,* come in…"

Spock was also trying, but quickly gave over in favor of a careful examination of his communicator. "Undamaged," he reported. "Yet something prevents them from functioning."

Kirk swung angrily to Lincoln. "Your explanation, sir."

"I have none, Captain. To me this seems quite as it should be."

"Why have our weapons been taken? Why can't we communicate with our ship?"

"Please believe me. I know nothing other than what I have already told you—"

"The game's over! We've treated you with courtesy, we've gone along with who and what you think you are—"

"Despite the seeming contradictions, all is as it appears to be. I *am* Abraham Lincoln—"

"Just," another voice entered, "as I am who I appear to be."

Another man was approaching them: a tall, distinguished Vulcan. It was obvious that he was old, but as erect and strong as was usual with Vulcans even in age. The dignity and wisdom apparent in his features and bearing matched those of Lincoln's.

"Surak!" Spock said, in outright open astonishment.

"Who?" Kirk said.

"The greatest who ever lived on our planet, Captain. The father of all we became."

Surak stopped and made the Vulcan hand sign. "Live long and prosper, Spock May you also, Captain Kirk."

"It is not logical that you are Surak," Spock said. There is no fact, extrapolation from fact, or theory which would make it possible—"

"Whatever I am, Spock, would it harm you to give response?"

Spock slowly lifted his hand and returned the sign. "Live long and prosper, image of Surak, father of all we now hold true."

The newcomer almost smiled. "The image of Surak read in your face what was in your mind, Spock."

"As I turned and beheld you, I displayed emotion. I beg forgiveness."

Surak nodded gravely. The cause was more than sufficient. We need speak no further of it. Captain, in my time, we knew not of Earthmen. And I am pleased to see we have differences. May we together become greater than the sum of both of us."

"Spock," Kirk said in an iron voice, "we will not go along with these charades any longer!"

He was answered by still another new voice, seemingly out of the air—an oddly reverberating voice. "You will have the answer soon, Captain."

A strange, shrilling sound, a little like the chiming of bells, followed the voice, and then, directly before the four, there was a rainbow flashing which congealed slowly into a bizarre shape. It was a creature made seemingly of rock, about the size and shape of a man but with clawlike appendages and a mouth which, like a cave, seemed to be permanently open. It was seated in a rock chair carved to fit its body.

"I am Yarnek," the voice reverberated from the open maw. "Our world is called Excalbia. Countless who live on that planet are watching. Before this drama unfolds, we give welcome to the ones named Kirk and Spock."

"We know nothing of your world or customs," Kirk said. "What do you mean by a drama about to unfold?"

"You are intelligent life forms. I am surprised you do not perceive the honor we do you." A claw gestured. "Have we not created in this place on our planet a stage identical to your own world?"

"We perceive only that we were invited down here and came in friendship. You have deprived us of our instruments for examining your world, of our means of defending ourselves and of communicating with our vessel."

"Your objection is well taken. We shall communicate with your vessel so that your fellow life forms may also enjoy and profit from the play. Behold… we begin."

At these words, four figures came into view at the edge of the glade, and approached cautiously. One was a squat human in a Mongol costume of about the 13th century; another, also human, in the uniform of a 21st century Colonel; one was a Klingon, and the last a female Tiburon. Except for the Colonel, who was dapper and not unhandsome, they were an ugly-looking lot.

"Some of these you may know through history," Yarnek said. "Genghis Khan, for one. And Colonel Green, who led a genocidal war in the 21st century on Earth. Kahless the Unforgettable, the Klingon who set the pattern for his planet's tyrannies. Zora, who experimented with the body chemistry of subject tribes on Tiburon.

"We welcome the vessel *Enterprise* to our solar system and our spectacle. We ask you to observe with us the confrontation of the two opposing philosophies you term 'good' and 'evil.' Since this is our first experiment with Earthlings, our theme is a simple one: survival. Life and death. Your philosophies are alien to us, and we wish to understand them and discover which is the stronger. We learn by observing such spectacles."

"What do you mean, survival?" Kirk said.

"The word is explicit. If you and Spock survive, you may return to your vessel. If you do not, your existence is ended. Your choice of action is unlimited, as is your choice of weapons, should you wish to use any—you may fabricate anything you desire out of what you find around you. Let the spectacle begin."

"Mr Spock and I refuse to participate."

"You will decide otherwise," Yarnek said, and then dissolved into that same mist of rainbows from which he had emerged.

"Analysis, Spock. Why do they want us to fight?"

"It may be exactly as explained, Captain. Our concept of good and evil would be strange to them. They wish to see which is strongest."

"And they'll have the answer if it kills us. Do you recall the exact location where we beamed down?"

"We have strayed from it somewhat, Captain. It was in that area, beyond those boulders."

"Ship's coordinates may still be locked in there." He started toward the spot, ignoring the others, Spock following. Lincoln and Surak were soon lost from view; but after a moment, rounding a large boulder, Kirk found himself face to face with them again. After staring at them, Kirk tried again, taking another path—with the same result.

"Mr Spock?"

"I have no explanation, sir. Unless the creature is compelling us to circle. Quite obviously it is preventing us from reaching that area."

"I'm afraid, Captain," Lincoln said, "that none of us may leave until we do what it demands.of us."

From the group of potential antagonists, Colonel Green stepped forward, his hand extended in a gesture of peace. His manner seemed friendly, even intended to charm. "Captain Kirk. May I? I'm Colonel Green. I quite agree with your attitude toward this charade. It's ridiculous to expect us to take part in it."

Kirk looked at him with open suspicion, and Green stopped while he was still a few steps away. "What do you want?"

"Exactly what you do. To get out of here. I have no quarrel with you, any more than you have with me."

"You're somewhat different from the way history paints you, Colonel."

"History tends to exaggerate," Green said with a small laugh. "I suggest we call a halt to this at once, and see if we can't find a way out of our difficulties. My associates are in full agreement with me."

Kirk looked beyond him at the "associates." Zora bowed gravely. Khan was hunkered down on the ground; apparently he was bored. Well, he had never been much of a man for talk. Kahless looked around curiously at the slopes.

"You were tricked into coming here, weren't you?" Green said. "So were we all."

"Where did you come from?"

"I don't remember… Isn't that strange? My memory used to be quite remarkable." He came closer, took Kirk's elbow confidentially, drawing him to one side. "But wherever it was, I want to get back. So it seems to me, Captain, that we have common cause, and that our enemy is that creature."

"What do you propose?"

"That we combine forces and reason out some way to overcome it. Are we in agreement?"

Kirk hesitated, studying him. "As I recall, Colonel, you were notorious for striking out at your enemies in the midst of negotiating with them."

"But that was centuries ago, Captain!" Green said, with a louder laugh. "And not altogether true! There is much that I'd change now if I could. Don't let prejudice and rumor sway you."

"Captain!" Spock shouted.

Suddenly everything seemed to be happening at once. Swinging, Kirk saw in a flash that Khan had somehow gotten to higher ground and was holding a boulder over his head in both hands. Then Green's arm was locked around Kirk's neck and he was thrown halfway to the ground. Kirk lashed out, staggering Green, and as he sprang to his feet saw Lincoln wrestling with Khan, who seemed to have missed whomever he had been aiming the boulder at.

Then the brawl was over as suddenly as it had begun, the four antagonists vanished among the boulders and trees of the canyon. Total silence swept over them. Breathing hard, Kirk joined the other three. All had been battered, Spock severely.

"Is anyone hurt?" Kirk said.

"I fear my clothing is somewhat damaged," Lincoln said. "But how delightful to discover at my age that I can still wrestle."

"Mr Spock?"

"Quite all right, Captain. However, I suggest that we prepare ourselves for another attack."

"No," Kirk said. "Green was right. That rocklike thing, Yarnek, is the enemy. Not those illusions."

"For an illusion, my opponent had a remarkable grip," Lincoln said, "But I forgot. You consider me an illusion, too."

"The Captain speaks wisely," Surak said. "These four are not our enemy. We should arrive together at a peaceful settlement,"

The bell-like trilling began once more, and with it the rainbow swirling. Yarnek was back.

"I am disappointed," the creature said. "You display no interest in the honor we do you. We offer you an opportunity to become our teachers. By demonstrating whether good or evil is more powerful—"

Kirk lunged at the creature. It did not move—but when Kirk seized it, it was as though he had tried to grab a red-hot stove. With a yell he snatched his hands back.

"You find my body heat distressing?" Yarnek said. "You forget the nature of this planet… I must conclude that your species requires a cause to fight for. You may now communicate with your ship."

Kirk fumbled for his communicator, and despite the pain of his seared hands, managed to flip it open. "Kirk to *Enterprise.* Come in. Kirk to *Enterprise,* Do you read me?"

"Be patient, Captain," Yarnek said. They read you."

Suddenly the communicator came alive in a bedlam of shouting voices, backed up by the sound of the ship's alarm. The bridge was obviously in turmoil.

"Mr Scott!" Uhura called. "The Captain is trying to reach us."

"Engineering!" Scout was shouting. "Give me that again, man, I canna hear you."

"Deterioration has just started, sir."

"What is it, Lieutenant?" Kirk demanded.

"Where?" Scott shouted.

"Red Alert, Captain," Uhura said. "Mr Scott is standing by."

"In the shielding between matter and antimatter. I don't know what started it."

"What caused the alert?"

"I don't know, sir. Mr Scott, I have the Captain."

"Check for radiation. Get a repair crew on it at once."

"I have already, sir. We can't seem to stop it."

"Is there danger of detonation?"

"Estimate four hours, sir."

"Mr Scott, sir, I have the Captain!"

"What? Oh-Captain, Scott here."

"Beam us aboard fast, Scotty."

"I canna, sir. There's a complete power failure. We're on emergency battery power only."

"What's happening?"

"I can't explain it, sir. Matter and antimatter are in Red Zone proximity. No knowing how it started and no stopping it either. The shielding is breaking down. Estimate four hours before it goes completely. That'll blow us up for fair!"

"The estimate is quite correct," Yarnek's hollow voice said. "Your ship will blow itself to atoms within four hours, Captain—unless you defeat the others before then. Is that cause enough to fight for?"

"What if they defeat us?"

"To save your ship and your crew, you have to win."

"Scotty, alert Starfleet Command. Disengage nacelles and jettison if possible. Scotty, do you read me?"

"Your communicators once more no longer function," Yarnek said. "You may proceed with the spectacle." With a chime and a shimmer, the creature was gone.

"The war is forced upon us, Captain," Lincoln said. "History repeats itself."

"Well," Kirk said, "I see nothing immoral in fighting illusions. It's play their game, fight, or lose the ship and every crewman aboard."

Spock looked toward Surak. "And if they're real, Captain?"

Kirk chose to let that go by. "We'll use the top of the defile as a base. It's defensible. They can't approach without our seeing them."

"Are we fighting a defensive war, James?" Lincoln said.

"We don't have the time. But if it goes against us I want a place to retreat to. Right now I want to scout them out, find their weaknesses and attack."

Lincoln smiled. "Do you drink whisky?"

"Occasionally," Kirk said, startled. "Why?"

"Because you have qualities very much like those of another man I admired greatly. One I mentioned before—General Grant."

The reminder of the possible illusory nature of all this was jarring, distracting. "Thank you. We'll need weapons. Spock, I believe the primitive Vulcans made something like a boomerang."

"Yes, Captain. However—"

"Spears, too. Slings. Mr President, you used slings as a boy—"

"Indeed I did." Lincoln stripped off his coat, pulled out his shirttail and ripped from it a long strip. Again that conflict of realism and illusion.

"Captain," Spock said, "logic dictates that we consider another course." He looked deferentially toward Surak, who thus far had remained a profoundly troubled nonparticipant in the discussion.

"In my time on Vulcan we too faced these alternatives," Surak said. "We had suffered devastating wars that nearly destroyed our planet and another was about to begin. We were torn. And out of our suffering some of us found the discipline to act. We sent emissaries to our opponents to propose peace. The first were killed. Others followed. Ultimately, we achieved peace, which has lasted since then."

"The circumstances were different, Surak."

"The face of war never changes. Look at us, Captain. We have been hurt. So have they. Surely it is more logical to heal than kill."

"I'm afraid that kind of logic doesn't apply here," Kirk said.

"That is precisely why we should not fight—"

"*My ship is at stake!*"

Surak said, "I will not harm others, Captain."

"Sir," Spock said, "his convictions are most profound on this matter—"

"So are mine, Spock! If I believed there was a peaceful way out of this—"

"The risk would be mine alone, Captain," Surak said. "And if I fail, you would lose nothing. I am no warrior."

There was a moment of silence, while Kirk looked from one Vulcan to the other.

"The Captain knows that I have fought at his side before," Spock said. "And I will now if need be. But I too am Vulcan, bred to peace. Let us attempt it."

"You saw how treacherously they acted," Kirk said.

"Yes, Captain," Surak said. "But perhaps it is our belief in peace which is actually being tested."

"Wellll… I have no authority over you. Do as you think best."

"Thank you. May you live long and prosper." Surak gave the Vulcan sign and went off. Kirk watched him depart, doubtful, but also with some awe. Then he shook the mood off.

"The weapons, gentlemen—in case he fails."

Time went past. The three fashioned crude spears, bolos, slings, boomerangs, and gathered rocks for throwing. Spock was visibly on edge; he kept looking after the vanished Surak.

"A brave man," Kirk said.

"Men of peace usually are, sir. On Vulcan he is revered as the Father of Civilization. The father-image has much meaning for us."

"You show emotion, Mr Spock," Kirk said, and then was instantly sorry he had said it; this was surely no time for needling. But Spock replied only: "I deeply respect what he accomplished."

"Let's hope he accomplishes something here."

As if on cue, the air was rent by a harrowing scream of agony.

"Surak!" Spock cried.

"Yes," Kirk said grimly. "I would guess that they're torturing him."

"Mr Spock!" Colonel Green's voice called, from no very great distance off. "Your friend wants you. He seems to be hurt."

"Help me, Spock!" Surak's voice called, raw with pain.

"You can't let him suffer," Green said.

"Sir," Spock said, his face like stone. "They are trying to goad us into attacking rashly."

"I know that."

"And he was aware that this might happen when he went—" Spock was interrupted by another scream.

"I should not have let him go," Kirk said.

"You had no choice, Captain—" Another scream. It cut Kirk like a knife, but Spock went on through it.

"You could not have stopped him."

"How can you ignore it?"

"I suspect it, sir. A Vulcan would not cry out so."

"So his suffering doesn't matter?"

"I am not insensitive to it, sir, nor am I ignoring it."

"I don't care whether he is Vulcan or not. He is in agony."

"The fact that he might not be Vulcan does not blind me to the fact."

The cry came again. "But you can listen to that and chop logic about it?" Kirk said. "Well, I can't!"

Kirk strode off toward the antagonists' camp. Spock was after him in one bound, grasping his arm.

"Captain, that is what they want of us. They are waiting for us to attempt a rescue."

"Perhaps we can rescue him, Mr Spock," Lincoln said. "I suggest that we do exactly what they want."

"Do what they want?"

"Not the way they want it, however. We must first convince them that they have provoked us to recklessness. James? You seem taken aback. I do not mean to presume upon your authority —"

"It isn't that."

"What I propose to do is that I circle around to their rear while you two provide a frontal distraction. It should be sufficiently violent to cover what I do."

"Which is—?"

"Slip into their camp and free him."

"No," Kirk said.

"I was something of a backwoodsman, James. I doubt that you could do what I was bred to."

"I won't have you risk it."

"I am no longer President," Lincoln said, with a slight smile. "Mr Spock, any comment?"

"No, sir."

"Then," Lincoln said, "one matter further, gentlemen. We fight on their level. With trickery, brutality, finality. We match their evil… You forget, James. I know I am reputed a gentle man. Kindly, I believe the word is. But I was Commander in Chief during the four bloodiest years of my country's history. I gave orders that sent a hundred thousand men to death by the hands of their brothers. There is no honorable way to kill, no gentle way to destroy. There is nothing good in war—except its ending. And you are fighting for the lives of your crew."

"Mr President," Kirk said, "your campaign."

The scream came again. It was markedly weaker.

Khan and Green were on watch as Kirk and Spock worked their way among the boulders to the enemy camp. Kirk made no particular effort at concealment, "accidentally" showing himself several times. By the time they were in range, Zora and Kahless had appeared, weapons at the ready.

Kirk and Spock rose as one, threw spears, and ducked again. One of the spears narrowly missed Khan, who with a wild yell retaliated with a boulder that came equally close.

When Kirk looked again, Green was gone, and a moment later, so were Kahless and Zora. Then Green came back. What did that maneuver mean? But Kirk was left no time to see more; Green

threw a spear at him with murderous accuracy, and he was forced to duck again.

Lincoln, creeping up at the rear, almost tripped a man-trap made of a tied-down sapling. Backing off, he deliberately tripped it, and then resumed crawling.

Ahead he could see Surak, bound to a tree, head slumped. No one else seemed to be around.

"Surak!" he called in a low voice. "I will have you free in a minute." Racing forward, he began to cut the thongs binding the Vulcan. "The others have drawn them away. We will circle around. It was a worthy effort, Surak. No need to blame yourself for its failure."

The thongs parted. As Lincoln put out a hand to help Surak, the Vulcan collapsed at his feet. He was dead.

"Help me, Lincoln!"

Lincoln spun. The voice had been Surak's, but it was coming from Kahless. He and Green were standing in the direction from which Lincoln had just come, grinning, spears ready.

It was only afterward that Kirk was able to sort the battle out. Their four antagonists had charged them, leaping with spears raised. Hit by a rock, Kirk stumbled and fell, and Zora was upon him at once; but whatever expertise she may have had in body chemistry, she was no fighter. Kirk rolled and threw her aside, hard. She was hurt and lay watching him in terror.

Nearby, Spock and Khan were fighting hand to hand. They seemed to be evenly matched, but Kirk had no chance to help—Kahless was upon him. The struggle was a violent, kaleidoscopic, head-banging eternity. When it stopped, very suddenly, it took Kirk several seconds to realize that he had killed the Klingon. Snatching up a spear, he ran at Khan, who broke free of Spock and fled, looking wildly behind him. Green was running now, too. Kirk snatched up a spear and threw it. He did not miss.

Then it was all over. Inside the enemy camp, they found the bodies of Lincoln and of Surak. They looked down with rage and grief. Neither could find anything to say.

Then, once more, the bell-like chiming sounded, and the seated, stony figure of Yarnek emerged from its cocoon of rainbows.

"You are the survivors," the echoing voice said. "The others have run off. It would appear that evil retreats when forcibly confronted. However, you have failed to demonstrate to me any other difference between your philosophies. Your good and your evil use

the same methods, achieve the same results. Do you have an explanation?"

"You established the methods and the goals," Kirk said.

"For you to use as you chose."

"What did you offer them if they won?"

"What they wanted most—power."

"You offered me the lives of my crew."

"I perceive," Yarnak said. "You have won their lives."

Kirk boiled over. "How many others have you done this to? What gives you the right to hand out life and death?"

"The same right that brought you here: the need to know new things."

"We came in peace—"

"And you may go in peace." Yarnak faded from view.

Kirk took out his communicator. "Kirk to *Enterprise*… Mr Sulu, beam us aboard."

On the bridge everything seemed to be functioning normally, as though nothing had ever gone wrong.

"Mr Spock," Kirk said. "Explanation?"

"Conjecture, sir, rather than explanation."

"Well?"

"It would seem that we were held in the power of creatures able to control matter, to rearrange molecules in whatever fashion they desired. So Yarnak was able to create the images of Surak and Lincoln and the others, after scanning our minds, by making use of its fellow creatures as source matter."

"They seemed so real, Spock. To me, especially, Mr Lincoln. I feel I actually met Lincoln."

Spock nodded. "And Surak. In a sense, perhaps they were, Captain. Created out of our own thoughts, how could they be anything but what we expected them to be?"

"It was so hard to see him die once again. I begin to understand what Earth endured to achieve final peace." Kirk paused. "Mr Spock… is there a memorial to Surak on Vulcan?"

"Yes, sir. A monument of great beauty. However, it is held generally that the true memorial to him is the peace and the

friendship that have endured among Vulcans since his time with them."

"The same with Lincoln. I think of all our heroes on Earth, he is the most loved today. We see his dreams around us. We have the brotherhood and equality of men that he hoped for, and we're still learning what he knew instinctively."

"Men of such stature live beyond their years."

"They were alive today, Spock. Those were more than rearranged molecules we saw."

"We projected into them our own concepts of them, sir."

"Did we?" After a moment, Kirk shook his head. "There is still much of their work to be done in the galaxy, Spock… Mr Sulu, break orbit for our next assignment"

ALL OUR YESTERDAYS

(Jean Lisette Aroeste)

The star Beta Niobe, the computer reported, was going to go nova in approximately three and a half hours from now. Its only satellite, Sarpeidon, was a Class M world which at last report had been inhabited by a humanoid species, civilized, but incapable of space flight. Nevertheless, the sensors of the *Enterprise* showed that no intelligent life remained on the planet.

But they did show that a large power generator was still functioning down there. That meant, possibly, that there were still some few survivors after all, in which case they had to be located and taken off before the planet was destroyed.

Homing the Transporter on the power signal, Kirk, Spock and McCoy materialized in the center of a fairly large room, subdivided by shelving and storage cabinets into several areas. One alcove contained a consultation desk, with shelves of books behind it. Another held several elaborate machines which were obviously in operation, humming and spinning and blinking. Kirk stared at these with bafflement, and then turned to Spock, who scanned them with his tricorder and raised his hands in a slight gesture.

"The power pulse source, obviously," the First Officer said. "But what it all *does* is another question."

Along one side was a less puzzling installation: an audiovisual facility containing several carrels (individual study desks) with headsets, projectors and small screens. The nearby wall was pierced by a door and a window. A tape storage area at the end of the room had been caged in, but its door stood ajar.

"May I help you?"

The three officers spun around. Facing them was a dignified, almost imposing man of early middle age. "I am the librarian," he added cordially.

Spock said, "Perhaps you can, Mr…?"

"Mr Atoz. I confess that I am a little surprised to see you; I had thought that everyone had long since gone. But the surprise is a

pleasant one. After all, a library serves no purpose unless someone is using it."

"You say that everyone has gone," Kirk said. "Where?"

"It depended upon the individual, of course. If you wish to trace a specific person, I'm sorry, but that information is confidential."

"No, no particular person," McCoy said. "Just—in general—where did they go?"

"Ah, you find it difficult to choose, is that it? Yes, a wide range of alternatives is a mixed blessing, but perhaps I can help. Would you come this way, please?" With a little bow, Atoz invited them to precede him to the audiovisual area. Apparently, Kirk thought, Atoz thought the three officers were natives, and that they wanted to go where the others had gone. Well, what better way to find out?

It was impossible not to be surprised, however, when Atoz, whom he would have sworn had been behind them, emerged smiling from the tape storage cage.

"How the devil did he get over there?" McCoy said in a penetrating stage whisper.

"Each viewing station in this facility is independently operated," Atoz said, as if that explained everything. "You may select from more than twenty thousand Verisim tapes, several hundred of which have only recently been added to the collection. I'm sure that you will find something here that pleases you." He turned toward Kirk. "You, sir, what is your particular field of interest?"

"How about recent history?" Kirk suggested.

"Really? That is too bad. We have so little on recent history; there was no demand for it."

"It doesn't have to be extensive," Kirk said. "Just the answers to a few questions."

"Ah, of course. In that case, Reference Service is available in the second alcove to your right."

It was not quite so surprising, this time, to find the incredible Mr Atoz already waiting for them at the reference desk. But there was something else: Kirk had the instant impression that Atoz had somehow never seen them before; a guess which was promptly confirmed by the man's first words.

"You're very late," he said angrily. "Where have you been?"

"We came as soon as we knew what was happening."

"*It is my fault, sir,*" Spock said. "I must have miscalculated. Remember, the ship's sensors indicated there was no one here at all."

"In a very few hours, you would have been absolutely correct," Atoz said. "You three would have perished—vaporized. You arrived just in time."

"Then you know what's going to happen?" McCoy queried.

"You idiot! Of course I know. Everyone was warned of the coming nova long ago. They followed instructions and are now safe. And you had better do the same."

"Did you say they were *safe?*" asked Kirk.

"Absolutely," Atoz said with pride. "Every single one."

"Safe where? Where did they go?"

"Wherever they wanted to go, of course. It is strictly up to the individual's choice."

"And did you alone send all the people of this planet to safety?"

"Yes," Atoz said. "I am proud to say I did. Of course, I had to delegate the simple tasks to my replicas; but the responsibility was mine alone."

"I believe we've met two of them," Kirk said, a little grimly. "You're the real thing, I take it."

"Of course."

McCoy was already scanning Atoz with his tricorder. "As a matter of fact, he is quite real, Jim. And that may explain the report of the ship's sensors; just one remaining man is a difficult object for detection. Sir, are you aware that you will die if you remain here?"

"Of course, but I plan to join my wife and family when the time comes. Do not be concerned about me. Think of yourselves."

Kirk sighed. The man was single-minded almost to the point of mania. But then, that was just the kind of man who'd be given a job like this. Or the kind of man such a job would soon make him. "All right," he said resignedly. "How? What shall we do?"

"The history of the planet is available in every detail," Atoz said, rising and leading them toward the tape carrels. "Just choose what interests you the most—the century, the date, the moment. But, remember, you are very late."

Kirk and McCoy donned headsets, and Atoz selected tapes from the shelves, inserting one in each viewer.

"Thank you, sir," Kirk said. "We will be as quick as we can." He offered a headset to Spock, but the First Officer shook his head and walked off toward the big machine that had mystified him earlier, and which Atoz now appeared to be activating. At the same time, Kirk's screen lighted and he found himself looking at an empty street—it was little more than an alley—which on Earth he

would have guessed to be seventeenth-century English. A quick glance to his left revealed that McCoy's screen showed something even less interesting: an Arctic waste. Atoz certainly had peculiar ideas of…

A woman screamed, piercingly.

Kirk jumped to his feet, tearing off the headset. The scream came again—not from the headset, obviously, but from the entrance to the observatory-library.

"Help! They're murdering me!"

"Spock! Bones!" Kirk shouted, charging for the door. "Over here, quick!"

Behind him, Atoz' voice cried out: "Stop! I have not prepared you! Wait, you must be…"

As Kirk shot out the door, the voice was cut off as if someone had thrown a switch…

? and he skidded to a halt in the alley he had seen on the screen!

There was no time for puzzlement. The alley was chill and misty, but real enough and the screams came from around the next corner, followed this time by a man's voice.

"Be sweet, love, and I might have a mind to be generous."

Kirk rounded the corner cautiously. A young man wearing velvet, lace and a sword was struggling with a woman dressed like a gypsy. She seemed to be giving him little trouble; though she was kicking and scratching, his handling was as much amorous as it was brutal. A second, even more foppish young man was lounging against the nearby wall, watching with amusement. Then the woman managed to bite the first one on the hand.

"Ow! Vixen!" He aimed a savage cuff at her cheek. The blow never fell; Kirk's hand closed around his upraised arm.

"Let her go," Kirk said.

The woman wiggled free, and the fop's face hardened. "Come when you are bidden, slave," he said, and aimed a roundhouse blow at Kirk's head. Kirk checked the swing and followed through, and a moment later his opponent was sprawling in the dirt.

The second fop shoved the woman aside and moved threateningly toward Kirk, his hand hovering over his rapier hilt. "You need a lesson in how to use your betters," he said. "Who's your master, fellow?"

"I am a freeman."

This seemed to put the fop almost into good humor again. He smiled nastily and drew his rapier.

"Freedom dresses you in poor livery, like a mountebank—and you want better manners, too, freeman." The rapier point slashed Kirk's sleeve.

"The other's behind you, friend!" the woman's voice called, but too late; Kirk was seized from behind. He elbowed his captor in the midriff and, when he broke away, he had the man's sword in his left hand. These creatures really seemed to know nothing at all about unarmed combat, but it would be as well to put an end to this right now. He drew his phaser and fired point-blank.

It didn't go off.

Dropping it, Kirk shifted sword hands and closed on the second fop. He was only fair as a swordsman, too; his lunges were clumsy enough to allow Kirk plenty of freedom to keep the weaponless first fop on the ropes with left-handed karate chops. The swordsman's eyes bulged when his companion went down for the third time and began to back away.

"Sladykins! He's a devil! I'll have no more of this."

He disengaged and ran, his friend not far behind. Kirk picked up and holstered the ineffective phaser and turned to the woman, who was patting her hair and checking her clothes for damage. The clothes were none too clean, and neither was she, although she was pretty enough.

"Thankee, man," she said. "I thought to be limbered sure when the gull caught me drawing his boung."

"I don't follow you. Are you all right?"

The woman looked him over calculatingly. "Ah, I took you for an angler, but you're none of us. Well, you're a bully fine cope for all that. What a handsome dish you served them, the coxcombs!"

She seemed to be becoming more incomprehensible by the minute. "I'm afraid you may be hurt," Kirk said. "You'd better come back into the library with me. You'll be safe there, and Dr McCoy can see to those bruises."

"I'm game, luv. Lead and I'll follow. Where's library?"

"Just back there…"

But when they got to the alley wall, it was blank. The door through which Kirk had come had vanished.

He prowled back and forth, then turned to the woman, who said, puzzled, "What's wi' you, man? Let's make off before coxcombs come wi' shoulder-clappers."

"Do you happen to remember when you first saw me? Do you remember whether I came through some kind of door?"

"I think that rum gull knocked you in the head. Come, luv. I know a leech who'll ask no questions."

"Wait. It must be here somewhere. Bones! Spock!"

"Here, Captain," the First Officer's voice said at once, to the woman's obvious alarm. "We hear you, but we cannot see you. Are you all right?"

"We followed you," McCoy's voice added, "but you'd disappeared."

"We must have missed each other in the fog."

"Fog, Captain?" Spock's voice said. "We have encountered no fog."

"Mercy on us," said the woman. "It's a spirit!"

"No, don't be frightened," Kirk said hastily. "These are friends of mine. They're—on the other side of the wall. Spock! Are you still in the library?"

"Indeed not," Spock's voice said. "We are in a wilderness of arctic characteristics…"

"He means that it's cold," McCoy's voice broke in drily.

"Approximately minus twenty-five centigrade. There is no library that we can see. We are at the foot of an ice cliff, and apparently we came *through* the cliff, since there is no visible aperture."

"There's no sign of a door here either," Kirk said. "Only the wall. It's foggy here, and I can smell the ocean."

"Yes. That is the period you were looking at in the viewer. Dr McCoy, on the other hand, was watching a

tape of Sarpeidon's last ice age—and here he is, and I with him because we left the library at the same instant."

"Which explains the disappearance of the inhabitants," Kirk concluded. "We certainly underestimated Mr Atoz."

The woman, clearly terrified by the disembodied voices, was edging away from him. Well, that wasn't important now.

"Yes," Spock was saying. "Apparently they have all escaped from the destruction of their world by retreating into the past."

"Well, we know how we got here. Can we get back? The portal's invisible, but we can still hear each other. There must be a portion of this wall that only *looks* solid…"

He was interrupted by still another scream from the woman, with whom he was beginning to feel definitely annoyed. He turned

to find that her attempt to run out of the alley had been blocked by the two fops, who had returned with a pair of obvious constables.

"My friends are back—a couple of, uh, coxcombs I had a run-in with a little earlier. And they've brought reinforcements."

"Keep looking, Jim," McCoy's voice urged. "You *must* be close to the portal. We're looking too."

"There's the mort's accomplice," one of the fops said, pointing at Kirk. "Arrest him."

"We are the law," one of the constables told Kirk, "and do require that you yield to us."

"On what charge?"

"Thievery and purse-cutting."

"Nonsense. I'm no thief."

"Jim," McCoy's voice said. "What's happening?"

"Lord help us, what's that?" exclaimed the other constable.

"It's spirits!" the woman cried.

The second constable crossed his sword and dagger and held them before him gingerly. He looked frightened, but he resumed advancing. "Depart, spirits, and let honest men approach."

Kirk seized his advantage. "Keep talking, Bones," he said, edging away.

"They speak at *his* bidding," one of the fops said excitedly. "Stop his mouth and they'll quiet!"

"You must be close to the portal now," Spock's voice said.

"Just keep talk…"

But the other constable had crept around to the other side. A heavy blow exploded against Kirk's head, and that was the end of that.

The landscape was barren, consisting entirely of ice and rocks, over which the wind howled mercilessly. The ruined buildings surrounding the library had vanished, and so had the library itself. There was nothing but the ice cliff and, on the other side, the rocky glacial plain stretching endlessly into the distance.

Spock continued to feel carefully along the cliff, trying not to maintain contact for more than a few seconds each time. Beside him, McCoy shivered and blew on his hands, then chafed his ears and face.

"Jim's gone!" the surgeon said. "Why can't we hear him?"

"I am afraid that Mr Atoz may have closed the portal; I doubt that I shall find it now, in any event. We had best move along."

"Jim sounded as if he might be in trouble."

"He doubtless was in trouble, but so are we. We must find shelter, or we will very quickly perish in this cold."

McCoy stumbled. Spock caught him and helped him to a seat on a large boulder, noting that his chin, nose and ears had become whitened and bloodless. The First Officer knew well enough what that meant. He also knew, geologically, where they were; in a terminal moraine, the rock-tumble pushed ahead of itself by an advancing glacier. The chances of finding shelter here were nil. It seemed a curious sort of refuge for a time-traveling people to pick, with so many milder environments available at will.

"Spock," McCoy said. "Leave me here."

"We go together or not at all."

"Don't be a fool. My face and hands are getting frostbitten. I can hardly feel my feet. Alone, you'll have a chance—at least to try to get back to Jim!"

"We stay together," Spock said.

"Stubborn, thickheaded…"

His voice faded. Spock looked about grimly. To his astonishment, he saw that they were being watched.

In the near distance was a cryptic figure clad in fur coveralls and a parka, its face concealed by a snow mask out of which two eyes stared intently. After a moment the figure beckoned, unmistakably.

Spock turned to McCoy, to find that he had fallen. He shook the medical officer, but there was no response. Spock put his ear to McCoy's chest; yes, heart still beating, but feebly.

A shadow fell across them both. The figure was standing over them; and again it gestured, *Follow me.*

"My companion is ill."

Follow me.

Logic dictated no better course. Slinging McCoy over his shoulder, Spock stood. The weight was not intolerable, though it threw him out of balance. The figure moved off among the rocks. Spock followed.

The way eventually took them underground, as Spock had already deduced that it would; where else, after all, could there be shelter in this wilderness? There were two rooms—caves, really—and one was a sleeping room, fairly small, windowless of

necessity, furnished most simply. Near the door was a rude bed on which Spock placed McCoy.

"Blankets," Spock said.

The figure pointed, then helped him cover the sick man. Spock looked through McCoy's medical pouch, found his tricorder, and began checking. The figure sat at the foot of the bed, watching Spock, still silent, utterly enigmatic.

"He cannot stand your weather. Unfortunately, he is the physician, not I. I'll not risk giving him medication at this point. If he is kept quiet and warm, he may recover naturally." He scrutinized the mysterious watcher. "It is quite agreeably warm in here. Have you a reason for continuing to wear that mask? Is there a taboo that prohibits my seeing your face?"

From behind the mask there came a musical feminine laugh, and then a feminine voice. "I had forgotten I still had these things on."

She took off the mask and parka, but her laughter died as she inspected Spock more closely. "Who are you?"

"I am called Spock."

"Even your name is strange. Forgive me—you are so unlike anyone I have ever seen."

"That is not surprising. Please do not be alarmed."

"Why are you here?" the woman asked hesitantly. "Are you prisoners too?"

"Prisoners?"

"This is one of the places—or rather, times—Zor Khan sends people when he wishes them to disappear. Didn't you come back through the time-portal?"

"Yes, but not as prisoners. We were sent here by mistake; or such is my hypothesis."

She considered this. "The Atavachron is far away," she said at last, "but I think you come from somewhere farther than that."

'That is true," Spock said. He looked at her more closely. This face out of the past, eager yet reposeful, without trace of artifice, was—could it be what Earthmen called *touching?* "Yes—I am not from the world you know at all. My home is a planet many light-years away."

"How wonderful! I've always loved the books about such possibilities." Her expression, though, darkened suddenly. "But they're only stories. This isn't real. I'm imagining all this. I'm going mad. I always thought I would."

As she shrank from him, Spock reached out and took her hand. "I am firmly convinced that I do in fact exist. I am substantial. You are not imagining this."

"I've been alone here for so long, longer than I want to remember," she said, with a weak smile. She was beginning to relax again. "When I saw you out there, I couldn't believe it."

Spock was beginning to feel something very like compassion for her, which was so unusual that it confused him—which was more unusual still. He turned back to McCoy and checked the unconscious man with the tricorder; this added alarm to the complex.

"I was wrong not to give him the coradrenaline," he said, taking the hypo out of the medical pouch and using it.

"What's happening? Is he dying? I have a few medicines…"

"Contra-indicated. Your physiology may be radically different. But I may have given him too much. Well, it's done now."

The woman watched him. "You seem so very calm," she said, "but I sense that he is someone close to you."

"We have gotten used to each other over the years. Aha…"

McCoy groaned, stirred and his breathing harshened, as though he were fighting for air. Spock leaned over him.

"Dr Leonard McCoy, wake up," he said formally but urgently. Then, "*Bones!*"

McCoy's breathing quieted gradually and Spock stepped back. The surgeon's eyes opened, and slowly came to focus on the woman.

"Who are you?" he asked fuzzily.

"My name is Zarabeth."

Somehow, Spock had never thought to ask that.

"Where's Spock?"

"I'm here, Doctor."

"Are we back in the library?"

"We are still in the ice age," Spock said. "But safe, for the moment."

McCoy tried to sit up, though it was obvious that he was still groggy. "Jim! Where's Jim? We've got to find Jim!"

"You are in no condition to get up. Rest now, and I will attempt to find the Captain."

McCoy allowed Spock to settle him back in bed. "Find him, Spock. Don't worry about me. Find him!"

He closed his eyes, and after a moment, Spock nodded silently toward the door. Zarabeth led the way back into the underground living room, then asked, "Who is this Jim?"

"Our Commanding Officer. Our friend."

"I saw only the two of you. I did not know that there was another."

"There—is not. He did not come with us. The time-portal sent him to another historical period, much later than this one. If I am to find him, there is only one avenue. Will you show me where the time-portal is?"

"But your friend—in the other room," Zarabeth said. "He is ill."

"It is true that if I leave him, there is the danger that he may never regain the ship." Spock thought it over. It proved to be peculiarly difficult. "He would then be marooned in this time-period. But he is no longer in danger of death, so my primary duty to him has been discharged… If I remain here, no one of our party can aid Captain Kirk…"

"You make it sound like an equation."

"It should be an equation," Spock said, frowning. "I should be able to resolve the problem logically. My impulse is to try to find the Captain, and yet—" he found that he was pacing, although it didn't seem to help much. "I have already made one error of judgment that nearly cost McCoy's life. I must not make another now. Perhaps it has to do with the Atavachron. If I knew more about how it works… Zarabeth, you say that you are a prisoner here. May I ask…"

"? why? My crime was in choosing my kinsmen unwisely. Two of them were involved in a conspiracy to kill Zor Khan. It wasn't enough to execute my kinsmen. Zor Khan determined to destroy our entire family. He used the Atavachron to send us to places where no one could ever find us."

"Ah. Then the solution is simple. Zor Khan exists no more. You and I can carry McCoy back to the library. I'll send you and McCoy to the ship, and have Mr Atoz send me to wherever Jim…"

"No!" Zarabeth cried, in obvious terror. "I can't go back through the portal now! I will be dead!"

"You cannot go back?"

"None of us can go back," she said, a little more calmly. "When we come through the portal, we are changed by the Atavachron. That is its function. Our basic metabolic structure is adjusted to the time we enter. You can't go back; if you pass through the portal again, you will be dead when you reach the other side."

And there it was. He and McCoy were trapped here, for the rest of their lives. And so was Jim, wherever *he* was.

When Kirk came to, he found himself all too obviously in jail, and a pretty primitive jail at that, lying on a rough pallet which squeaked of straw. Fingering his head and wincing, he got up and went to the barred door. There was nothing to be seen but a gloomy corridor and the cell opposite his. The gypsy was in it.

She seemed to be about to speak to him, but at that moment there were voices in the near distance and, instead, she shrank into a far corner of her cell. In another moment the constable hove into view, leading a man whose demeanor was all too obviously that of a public prosecutor.

"That's the man," the constable said, pointing to Kirk. "That's the mort's henchman."

He let the prosecutor into the cell. The man regarded Kirk curiously. "You are the thief who talks to spirits?"

"Your honor. I am a stranger here."

"Where are you from?"

Kirk hesitated. "An island."

"What is this island?"

"We call it Earth."

"I know of no island Earth. No matter. Continue."

"I'd never seen the lady across the way before tonight when I heard her scream. As far as I could tell, she was being attacked."

"Then you deny that you're the wench's accomplice?"

"Yes. I was reading in the library when I heard her scream." The prosecutor started visibly at the word "library," and Kirk pursued the advantage, whatever it might be. "Perhaps you remember where the library is?"

"Well, well, perhaps your part in this is innocent," the prosecutor said, with some agitation. "I believe you to be an honest man."

"He's a witch!" screamed the woman from her cell.

"Now, wait a minute…"

"Take care, woman," the prosecutor said heavily. "I am convinced you're guilty. Do not compound it with false accusation."

"He speaks to unclean spirits! He's a witch. Constable, you heard the voices!"

"It's truth, my lord," the constable said. "I heard the spirit call him. He answered and did call it 'Bones.' "

"He's a witch," the woman insisted. "He cast a spell and made me steal against my wish."

Aghast, Kirk looked into each face in turn. There was no doubt about it; they believed in witches, all of them. The prosecutor, looking even graver than before, asked the constable, with some reluctance, "You heard these—spirits?"

"Aye, my lord. I'll witness to it."

"The 'voices' they heard were only friends of mine," Kirk said desperately. "They were still on the other side of the wall, in the library, my lord."

"I know nothing of this," the prosecutor said agitatedly. "*I* cannot judge so grave a matter. Let someone learned in witchcraft examine him. I will have no more to do with this."

"Look, sir. Couldn't you at least arrange for me to see Mr Atoz? You do remember Mr Atoz, don't you?"

"I know of no Atoz. I know nothing of this, nothing of these matters. Take him. I will not hear him."

The constable let the prosecutor out, and together they hurried down the corridor.

Kirk called after them, "Only let me speak to you, my lord!"

They vanished without looking back. Kirk shook the bars, frustrated, angry, hopelessly aware that he was alone and friendless here. Across the corridor, the woman's face was contorted with fear and hatred.

"Witch! Witch!" she shrilled. "They'll burn you!"

They took her away later the next day. Kirk scarcely noticed. He was trying to work out a course of action. He had never seen a jail that looked easier to break, but all attempts to think beyond that point were impeded by a growing headache; and when he got up from the pallet to make sure his hands would fit freely through the bars, he had a sudden spell of faintness. Had he caught some kind of bug?

Down the corridor there was a jingling of keys. The jailer was coming with food. It was now or never.

He was sitting on the pallet again when the jailer arrived; but when the jailer straightened from setting down the bowl of food, Kirk's arm was around his throat, his other hand lifting the ring of keys from his belt. Opening the door from the outside, Kirk pulled the terrified man into the cell and shut the door again.

Releasing his grip, Kirk allowed the jailer a single cry, then knocked him out with a quick chop and rolled him under the pallet. End of Standard Escape Maneuver One. With any luck, that cry should bring the constable, and safe-conduct. Curious how dizzy he felt. On an impulse, he lay down and closed his eyes.

He heard hurrying feet, then the creak of the hinges as the newcomer tried the door. The subsequent muffled exclamation told him that he had been luckier than he knew; the man outside was the prosecutor. Kirk emitted a muffled groan.

Shuffling noises, and then the sound of breathing told him that the prosecutor was bending over him. A quick glance through half-closed lids told him where the nearest wrist was. He grabbed it.

"If you yell, I'll kill you," he whispered with fierce intensity.

The prosecutor neither yelled nor struggled. He merely said, "It will go harder with you if you persist."

"I am being falsely accused. You know it."

"You are to come with me to the Inquisitional Tribunal. There the matter of your witchcraft will be decided."

"There are no such things as witches."

"I shan't say you said so," the prosecutor said. "That is heresy. If they hear you, they will burn you for such beliefs."

"You are the only one who can hear me. Before the Inquisitor, it will be different. I'll denounce you as a man who came from the future, just as I did. Therefore, you too are a witch."

'They would surely burn me as well," the prosecutor agreed. "But what good would that do you?"

"Use your head, man," Kirk said. "I need your help."

"How can I help you? I will do my utmost to plead your innocence. I may be able to get you off—providing you say nothing of the comrades you left behind."

"Not good enough. I want you to help me to return to the library."

"You cannot go back."

"I tell you, I must. My comrades are lost in another time-period. I have to find them. Why don't you go back too?"

"We can never go back," the prosecutor said. "We must live out our lives here in the past. The Atavachron has prepared our cell structure and brain pattern to make life here natural. To return to the future would mean instant death."

"Prepared?" Kirk said. "I am here by accident. Your Mr Atoz did not prepare me in any way." As he spoke, his temples began to

throb again.

"Then you must get back at once. If you were not transformed, you cannot survive more than a few days here."

"Then you'll show me where the portal is?"

"Yes—approximately. But you must find the exact spot yourself. You understand I dare not wait with you…"

"Of course. Let's go."

Five minutes later, Kirk was back in the library. It looked as empty as it had when he had first seen it. He checked the contemporary time with the *Enterprise,* shunting aside a barrage of frantic questions. It was seventeen minutes to nova. Evidently, no matter how much time he spent in the past, the gate at its present setting would always return him to this day. It had to; for the gate, there would be no tomorrow.

He drew his phaser. It had not worked in the past, but he was quite certain it would work here. And this time, Mr Atoz, he thought grimly, you are going to be *helpful.*

McCoy was still abed, but he was feeling distinctly better, as his appetite proved. Zarabeth, who had adopted a flowing gown which made her look positively beautiful, was out in her work area, making something she had promised would be a delicacy.

"I hope the *Enterprise* got away in time," McCoy said.

"I hope it will get away. The event is a hundred thousand years in the future."

"Yes, I know. I wonder where Jim is?"

"Who knows?" Spock said. "We can only hope he is well, wherever he is."

"What do you mean, we can only hope? Haven't you done anything about it?"

"What was there to do?"

"Locate the portal," McCoy said impatiently. "We certainly didn't come very far from it."

"We've been through all that already, Doctor. What's the point of rehashing the subject? We can't get back. Wasn't that clear to you?"

"Perfectly. I just don't believe it. I refuse to give up trying."

"It would be suicide if you succeeded."

McCoy sighed. "I never thought I'd see it. But I understand. You want to stay here. I might say, you are highly motivated to remain in this forsaken waste."

And not ten minutes ago, Spock thought, it had been McCoy who had been praising Zarabeth's cooking, and offering other small gallantries. "The prospect seemed quite attractive to you a few moments ago."

"Listen to me," McCoy said, "you point-eared Vulcan…"

Before Spock fully realized what he was doing, he found himself leaning forward and lifting McCoy off the bed.

"I don't like that," he said. "I don't believe I ever did. Now I'm sure."

McCoy did not look in the least alarmed. He simply seemed to by studying Spock intently. "What is it, Spock?" he asked. "What's happening?"

Spock let him drop. "Nothing that shouldn't have happened long ago."

"Long ago," McCoy said softly. The intent scrutiny did not waver. "Yes, I guess so… Long ago."

The stare disturbed the First Officer, for reasons he did not understand. Wheeling, he went into the underground living room, where Zarabeth was setting a table. She looked up and smiled.

"Ready soon. Would you like a sample?"

"Thank you, but I am not hungry."

She came over and sat down near him. "I can imagine how you must feel. I know what it's like to be sent here against your will."

"My feelings, as you call them, are of no concern," Spock said. "I have accepted the situation."

"I cannot pretend that I am sorry you are here, though I realize that it is a misfortune for you. I am here against my will, too, just as you are."

"I'm sorry I know of no way to return you to your own time."

"I don't mean that I wish to return," Zarabeth said. "This is my time now. I've had to face that. But it has been lonely here. Do you know what it is like to be alone, really alone?"

"Yes. I know what it is like."

"I believe you do. Won't you eat something? Please?"

"If it pleases you." He walked to the table and surveyed it. He felt a faint shock, but it seemed far away. "This is animal flesh."

There isn't much else to eat here, I'm afraid."

"Naturally, because of the climate. What is the source of heat in this shelter?"

'There is an underground hot spring that furnishes natural steam heat and power."

"And there is sunlight available outside. Excellent. It should be possible to build a greenhouse of sorts. Until then, this will have to do as a source of nourishment." He picked up the most innocuous-looking morsel, surveyed it with distaste, and bit into it. It was quite good; he took another.

"There aren't many luxuries here," Zarabeth said, watching him with evident approval. "Zor Khan left me only what was necessary to survive."

"But he evidently intended you to continue living," Spock said, sampling another dish.

"Yes. He gave me weapons, a shelter, food—everything I needed to live—except companionship. He did not want it said that he had had me killed. But to send me here alone—if that is not death, what is? A very inventive mind, that man."

"But insensitive, to send such a beautiful woman into exile." Instantly, he was badly startled. "Forgive me! I am not usually given to personal remarks."

"How could I possibly take offense?" Zarabeth said.

Spock scarcely heard her. "The cold must have affected me more than I realized. Please—pay no attention. I am not myself."

And that, he thought, was an understatement. He was behaving disgracefully. He had eaten animal flesh—and had enjoyed it! What was wrong with him? He put his hands to his temples.

"I say you are beautiful," he said, feeling a dawning wonder. "But you *are* beautiful. Is it so wrong to tell you so?"

Zarabeth came to him. "I have longed to hear you say it," she said softly.

Then she was in his arms. When the kiss ended, he felt as though a man who had always been locked up inside him had been set free.

"You are beautiful," he said, "beautiful beyond any dream of beauty I have ever had. I shall never stop telling you of it."

"Stay," she whispered. "I shall make you happy."

"My life is here."

"*You lie,*" said a voice from the doorway. Spock spun, furious with McCoy and enjoying it.

"I speak the present truth," he said. "We are here, for good. I have given you the facts."

"The facts as *you* know them. But you are also being dishonest with yourself, and that's also something new for you. You accepted Zarabeth's word because it was what you wanted to believe. But Zarabeth is a woman condemned to a terrible life of loneliness. She will do anything to anybody to change that, won't you, Zarabeth?"

"I told you what I know," Zarabeth said.

"Not quite, I believe. You said *we* can't get back. The truth is that *you* can't get back. Isn't it?"

"She would not jeopardize other lives…"

"To save herself from this life alone," McCoy said, "she would lie—and even murder me, the Captain, the whole crew of the *Enterprise,* to keep you here with her." His hand lashed out and caught her by the wrist. "Tell Spock the truth—you would kill to keep him here!"

Zarabeth cried out in terror, and in the next instant Spock found his hands closing around the physician's throat. McCoy did not resist.

"Spock!" he said intensely. "Think! Are you trying to kill me? Is that what you want? What are you feeling? Rage? Jealousy? Have you ever felt them before?"

Spock's hands dropped. His head was whirling. "Impossible," he said. "This is impossible. I am a Vulcan."

"The Vulcan you knew will not exist for another hundred thousand years! Think, Spock—what is it like on your planet now, at this moment?"

"My ancestors are barbarians. Irrational, warlike barbarians…"

"Who nearly killed themselves off with their passions! And now you are regressing to what they were!"

"I have lost myself," Spock said dully. "I do not know who I am. Zarabeth—can we go back?"

"I do not know. I do not know. It is impossible for me to go back. I thought it was true for you."

"I am going to try, Spock," McCoy said. "My life is there, and I want the life that belongs to me. I must go *now.* There isn't much time—I too am changing. Zarabeth, will you help me find my way to the portal?"

"I—Yes. If I must."

"Let's get dressed, then."

The cold seemed more intense than ever, and McCoy, wrapped in a blanket, still had little resistance to it. He leaned against the ice cliff, partially supported by Zarabeth, who once more was almost anonymous in her furs. Spock tapped the cliff, without success.

"There is no portal here," he said. "It's hopeless, McCoy."

"I suppose you're right."

"You're too ill to stay out here in the cold any longer. Give it up."

And then, faintly, they heard Kirk's voice. "Spock! Can you hear me?"

"It's Jim!" McCoy shouted. "Here we are!"

"Stop, we've found them," Kirk's voice said. "Hold it steady, Atoz. Can you hear me any better?"

"Yes," Spock said. "We hear you perfectly now."

"Follow my voice."

McCoy reached out. His hand disappeared into the cliff. "Here it is! Come on, Spock!"

"Start ahead." He turned to Zarabeth. "I do not wish to part from you."

"I can't come with you. You know that."

"What are you waiting for?" Kirk's voice said. "Hurry! Scotty says we've got to get back on board right now!"

"They will have to come through together," the voice of Atoz added, "as they went out together. Singly, the portal will reject them."

Spock and Zarabeth looked at each other with despair. He touched her face with his fingertips.

"I did lie," she said. "I knew the truth. I will pay. Goodbye."

Then they were in the library, Kirk pulling them through. Atoz was spinning the dials of the Atavachron frantically, and then, dashing past them, dived into the portal and vanished.

"Atoz!" McCoy called.

"He had his escape planned," Kirk said. "I'm glad he made it." He raised his communicator. "Are you there, Scotty?"

"Aye. It's now or never."

Spock turned toward the portal and raised his fist as if to strike it, but he did not complete the gesture.

"Beam us up. Maximum warp as soon as we are on board."

The library shimmered out of existence, and they were standing in the Transporter Room of the *Enterprise.* McCoy, still wrapped in his blanket, was once more regarding Spock with his intent clinical stare.

"There is no further need for you to observe me, Doctor," Spock said. "As you see, I have returned to the present. In every sense."

"Are you sure? It did happen, Spock."

"Yes, it happened," the First Officer said. "But that was a hundred thousand years ago. They are all dead. Dead and buried long ago."

The ship fled outward. Behind it, the nova began to erupt, in all its terrifying, inhuman glory.

TURNABOUT INTRUDER

(Gene Roddenberry and Arthur H. Singer)

The *Enterprise* had been proceeding to a carefully timed rendezvous when she received a distress call from a group of archaeologists who had been exploring the ruins on Camus Two. Their situation was apparently desperate, and Kirk interrupted the mission to beam down to their assistance, together with Spock and McCoy.

In the group's headquarters they found two of the survivors, one of whom Kirk knew: Dr Janice Lester, the leader of the expedition. She was lying on a cot, semiconscious. Her companion, Dr Howard Coleman, looked healthy enough but rather insecure.

"What's wrong with her?" Kirk asked.

"Radiation sickness," said Coleman.

"I'd like to put the ship's complete medical facilities to work to save her. Can we get her aboard the *Enterprise?'*

"Exposing her to the shock of Transportation would be very dangerous. The radiation affects the nervous system."

McCoy looked up from his examination of the woman. "I can find no detectable signs of conventional radiation injury, Dr Coleman," he said.

"Dr Lester was farthest from the source. Fortunately for me, I was here at headquarters."

"Then the symptoms may not have completely developed."

"What happened to those who were closest to the point of exposure?" Kirk asked.

"They became delirious from the multiplying internal lesions and ran off mad with pain. They are probably dead."

"What form of radiation was it?" McCoy asked.

"Nothing I have ever encountered."

Janice Lester stirred and moaned, and her eyes fluttered open. Kirk came to her side and took her hand, smiling.

"You are to be absolutely quiet. Those are the doctor's orders, Janice, not mine."

Spock had been scanning with his tricorder. "Captain, I am picking up very faint life readings seven hundred meters from here. Help will have to be immediate."

Kirk turned to McCoy, who said, "There is nothing more to be done for her, Captain. Your presence should help quiet her."

As McCoy and Spock went out, Janice released Kirk's hand, and she said with great effort, "I hoped I would never see you again."

"I don't blame you."

Her eyes closed. "Why don't you kill me? It would be easy for you now. No one would know."

"I never wanted to hurt you," Kirk said, startled.

"You did."

"Only so I could survive as myself."

"I died. When you left me, I died."

"You still exaggerate," Kirk said, trying for the light touch. "I have heard reports of your work."

"Digging in the ruins of dead civilizations."

"You lead in your field."

She opened her eyes and stared directly into his. "The year we were together at Starfleet is the only time in my life I was alive."

"I didn't stop you from going on with space work."

"I had to! Where would it lead? Your world of Star-ship captains doesn't admit women."

"You've always blamed me for that," Kirk said.

"You accepted it."

"I couldn't have changed it," he pointed out.

"You believed they were right. I know you did."

"And you hated me for it. How you hated. Every minute we were together became an agony."

"It isn't fair…"

"No, it isn't. And I was the one you punished and tortured because of it."

"I loved you," she said. "We could have roamed among the stars."

"We would have killed each other."

"It might have been better."

"Why do you say that?" he demanded. "You're still young."

"A woman should not be alone."

"Don't you see now, we shouldn't be together? We never should have—I'm sorry. Forgive me. You must be quiet now."

"Yes." Her eyes closed and her head sank back on the cot.

"Janice—please let me help you this time."

In a deadly quiet voice, she said, "You are helping me, James."

He looked at her sadly for a moment and then turned away. The rest of the room, he noticed for the first time, was a litter of objects the group had collected from the ruins. The largest piece seemed to be an inscribed slab of metal, big enough to have been part of a wall. Kirk crossed to it. On its sides, he now saw, were what seemed to be control elements; some land of machine, then. He wondered what sort of people had used it, and for what.

"A very remarkable object," Janice's voice said behind him.

"Really? What is it for, do you know?"

"Mentally superior people who were dying would exchange bodies with the physically strong. Immortality could be had by those who deserved it."

"And who chose the deserving?"

"In this case," she said, "I do."

The wall flared brilliantly in Kirk's face, and he felt a fearful internal wrench, as though something were trying to turn him inside out. When he could see again…

? he was looking at himself, through the eyes of Janice Lester.

Kirk/J left the wall, and coming over to the cot, found a scarf, which he began to fold. Then he bent and pressed it over the woman's mouth and nose.

"You had your chance, Captain Kirk. You could have smothered the life in me and they would have said Dr Janice Lester died of radiation sickness acquired in the line of duty. Why didn't you? You've always wanted to!"

Janice/K's head moved feebly in denial. The scarf pressed down harder.

"You had the strength to carry it out. But you were afraid, always afraid. Now Janice Lester will take Cap-tain Kirk's place. I already possess your physical strength. But *this* Captain Kirk is not afraid to kill." Kirk/J was almost crooning now, a song of self-

hatred. "Now you know the indignity of being a woman. But you will not suffer long. For you the agony will soon pass—as it did for me."

The woman's hand tried to pull his away.

"Quiet. Believe me, it is better to be dead than to live alone in the body of a woman."

The struggling ceased, but Kirk/J did not release his hand until he heard footsteps outside. Then he replaced the scarf and went back to examining the wall. The search party entered only a moment later, looking grim.

"Your report, Dr McCoy."

"We were too late. There was no way to help them."

"Was it radiation as reported?"

McCoy nodded. "I believe it was celebium. Dr Coleman does not agree. It's essential to be specific."

"Why? Radioactivity is radioactivity, whatever the source."

"Yes, but in this case there was chemical poisoning involved as well, All the heavy elements are chemically virulent."

"Evidently," Spock added, "the field team broke through a newly exposed crust to a hidden cache of the radioactive element, whatever it was. The damage was instantaneous. They could not get away."

"That," Kirk/J said angrily, "will reflect on Dr Lester's reputation for thorough preparedness."

"I don't think Dr Lester can be blamed," McCoy said. "It was a most unfortunate accident, Captain."

"It was careless field work. Dr Lester will be held responsible—unfair as it may be."

Dr Coleman looked somewhat fearfully at Kirk/J and went quickly to Janice, bending to examine her. "Dr McCoy!"

McCoy was there in an instant, tricorder out. "Jim, did you notice any unusual symptoms while we were gone?"

"Nothing at all. She has remained unconscious all the time."

"Dr Lester is near death," Coleman said.

"Perhaps the shock of knowing what happened to her staff is part of the problem."

"I'm sure it is."

"Beaming her up to the *Enterprise,*" McCoy said, "would be less harmful than waiting."

Kirk/J looked questioningly at Coleman, who now seemed frightened. "I don't know," the man said.

"Then well go."

At Kirk/J's orders, two medical aides were ready with a stretcher when the party materialized in the Transporter Room. Coleman accompanied the patient to sick-ay.

"Mr Spock, take the ship out of orbit and resume designated course. Dr McCoy, a word with you, please. You and Dr Coleman disagree in your diagnosis. Please try to come to an agreement as fast as possible. The matter is especially disturbing—for personal reasons."

"I didn't realize you knew her so well," McCoy said.

"It has been a long time since I saw her. I walked out when it became serious."

"You must have been very young at the time."

"Youth doesn't excuse everything. It's a very unhappy memory."

"Everything possible will be done, Jim."

"Good. Thank you—Bones."

Kirk/J went to the bridge. Uhura, Chekov and Scott were all at their posts, as was Sulu. Spock was intent over his console. Kirk/J looked searchingly at the new faces, and Uhura and Sulu smiled back.

He came slowly to the Captain's position and touched the chair lightly, testing its maneuverability, almost as if with awe. Then he sat down in it and looked up at the viewing screen.

"Course, Mr Chekov?"

"One twenty-seven, Mark eight."

"Mr Sulu, set speed at Warp Factor Two."

"Warp Factor Two, sir."

"Mr Spock, would you come here a moment, please? Thank you. We have a problem with our patient. The two doctors disagree on their diagnosis."

"That is hardly unusual in the medical fraternity, sir."

"Too bad it doesn't help cure their patients," Kirk/J said with an edgy smile.

"I think you can rely on Dr McCoy's advice."

The edginess grew. "Do you have any specific evidence that confirms his opinion?"

"Not precisely, Captain. It is not my function."

"Then don't add to the confusion, Mr Spock." Kirk/J arose and strode angrily to the elevator.

In sickbay, he found that Janice/K was regaining consciousness. Moments of quiet were interspersed with sudden flailing movements, which were restrained by straps, and moaning. A very frightened Dr Coleman was pacing beside her.

"How long has this been going on?" Kirk/J asked.

"It just began."

"You must put a stop to it. If you let Dr Lester become fully conscious, she will know what has happened."

"Probably no one will believe it," Coleman said.

"Probably?"

"That's all we can hope for. How could death be explained now?"

Kirk/J went to the head of the cot, Coleman following on the other side. "I tell you, it can't continue!"

"You killed every one of the staff. You sent them where you knew the celebium shielding was weak. Why didn't you kill *him?* You had the perfect opportunity."

"You didn't give me enough time."

"You had every minute you asked for."

"He hung onto life too hard. I couldn't…"

"You couldn't because you love him," Coleman said, his voice beginning to rise. "You want me to be his murderer."

"Love *him?*" Kirk/J said, his voice also rising. "I loved the life he led—the power of the Starship Commander. It's my life now."

"I won't become a murderer." Coleman turned and walked quickly toward the door. Kirk/J leaped to block his way.

"You *are* a murderer. You knew it was celebium. You could have treated them for that. You are a murderer many times."

The moaning grew louder. The doors to the medical lab opened and McCoy and Nurse Chapel came to the cot.

"I thought I could quiet Dr Lester by my presence," Kirk/J said smoothly. "It seems to have had the opposite effect."

"It has nothing to do with you," Coleman said, with ill-concealed agitation. "It's a symptom of the developing radiation sickness."

"Tests with the ship's equipment," McCoy said, "show no sign of internal radiation damage."

"Dr Coleman," Kirk/J said, "didn't Dr Lester's staff become delirious before they went off to die?"

"Yes, Captain."

"But, Jim," said McCoy, "Dr Lester could as easily be suffering from a phaser stun from all the symptoms I detect."

"Dr Lester and her staff have been under my supervision for two years now," Coleman said stiffly. "If you do not accept my recommendations, responsibility for her health—or her death—will be yours."

Kirk/J looked toward the bed. Janice/K's movements were growing stronger. Then they stopped as her eyes opened; she looked about as if struggling to see and recognize the faces.

"Dr McCoy," Kirk/J said, "I'm sorry, but I shall have to remove you from the case and turn it over to Dr Coleman."

"You can't do that! On this ship, my medical authority is final."

"Dr Coleman wishes to assume full responsibility. Let him do so."

"I will not allow it."

"It has been done." Kirk/J turned to Coleman. "Dr Lester Is your patient. I believe you were about to administer a sedative when I came in.

"No!" the woman cried. "No sedative!" But the job was done.

Starting with the considerable advantage of her year in Starfleet with Kirk, Janice Lester had spent more years studying every single detail of a starship's operation—a knowledge which was now to be put to the test. With a little experience, she could probably become invulnerable to suspicion. But the presence aboard of the personality of James Kirk, even under sedation, was a constant threat to her position. It would be better to leave Janice/K among strangers, who would probably consider her insane.

"Plot a course for the Benecia Colony, Mr Chekov. How long would it take to reach the colony at present speed?"

"Forty-eight hours, Captain."

"Captain," Spock said, "it will delay our work at Beta Aurigae. It means reversing course."

"It can't be helped. We must take Dr Lester where she can be treated."

"May I point out, Captain, that Starbase Two is on the direct route to our destination?"

"How long to Starbase Two, Mr Chekov?" Kirk/J asked.

"Seventy-two hours, sir."

"That's twenty-four hours too long. Dr Lester's condition is increasingly serious. Continue present course."

"Captain, if the diagnosis of Dr Lester's illness is the critical problem, the Benecia Colony is definitely not the place for her," Spock said. "Its medical facilities are the most primitive."

"They will have to serve the purpose."

"Starbase Two is fully equipped and staffed with the necessary specialists to determine exactly what is wrong with the Doctor. Isn't that crucial to your decision, Captain?"

Thank you, Mr Spock. But the facilities will be of no use if Dr Lester is dead. Time is of the essence. Continue on course, Mr Sulu."

"Captain," Uhura said, "shall I advise Starfleet Command of the change of plans?"

"No *change* of plan has been ordered, Lieutenant. Our arrival at Beta Aurigae will be *delayed.* Our gravitational studies of that binary system will not suffer, and we may save a life. That is not unusual procedure for the *Enterprise.*" Kirk/J arose and went toward the elevator.

"I believe," Spock said, "Starfleet will have to know that our rendezvous with the Starship *Potemkin* will not be kept as scheduled."

"Mr Spock—if you would concentrate on the areas for which you are responsible, Starfleet would have been informed already."

"Sir, the Captain deals directly with Starfleet on these matters. I assumed that action on my part would be deemed interference."

"Advise Starfleet of the delay, Lieutenant Uhura. Mr Sulu, maintain course. Increase speed to Warp Six."

Kirk/J escaped from the bridge to the Captain's quarters, but there was no respite there; McCoy was waiting for him.

"Dr McCoy, are we about to have another fruitless argument about diagnosis?"

McCoy's fist slammed on the top of Kirk's desk. "No, dammit—sir. I'll let my record speak for me."

"Why are you so defensive? There was no implied criticism of you in my order to remove you from the case."

"That's not why I'm here. I'm here because Dr Coleman's record says he is incompetent."

"That's the opinion of an individual."

"No, sir. It's the considered opinion of Starfleet Command. I checked with them. Dr Coleman was removed from his post as

Chief Medical Officer of his ship for administrative incompetence…"

"Administrative duties are not required of him here."

"As well as for flagrant medical blunders."

"Promotions and demotions are sometimes politically motivated," Kirk/J said. "You know that, Doc."

"Not in Starfleet headquarters, *Captain.* At least, not in the Surgeon General's office."

Kirk/J paced for a moment. "I'm afraid the order will have to stand. Dr Coleman's experience with what happened on the planet had to be the deciding factor. I'm sure you appreciate that."

"I appreciate that you had to make a decision. I, too, have that responsibility, Jim. So I'm asking you to report for a complete checkup."

"Why? What do you base it on?"

"Developing emotional instability and erratic behaviour since returning from the planet."

"You'll never make that charge stick!" Kirk/J said furiously. "Any fool can see why you're doing this!"

"Starfleet Command will be the judge of my motive."

"I won't submit to this petty search for revenge."

"You will submit to Starfleet regulations," McCoy said. "They state that the ship's surgeon will require a full examination of any member of the crew about whom he has doubts—including the Captain. I am ordering you to report for that examination…"

He was interrupted by the intercom buzzer.

"Captain Kirk here."

"Lieutenant Uhura, sir. Starfleet Command is requesting additional details of the delay. Shall I handle it?"

"I'll be right there."

The examination could not be postponed indefinitely, however. Knowledge of the Captain's aberrant behaviour was spreading throughout the ship; the crew was becoming increasingly tense. To McCoy's apparent surprise, however, Kirk/J satisfied every test completely.

This stroke of luck was followed by another. Struggling out from under sedation in Dr Coleman's absence, Janice /K had avoided another injection by persuading Nurse Chapel of her docility—and then had sawed through her restraining straps with a broken medicine glass. Running wildly through the ship holding the glass like a weapon, calling for help and denouncing the Captain as a

strutting pretender, she presented the perfect picture of a dangerous madwoman—giving Kirk/J all the pretext he needed to have her put in isolation in a detention cell, with around-the-clock security.

In this, however, he underestimated Spock; of whose sharp observation and penetrating logic the bogus Captain had had only the briefest of experience. The Science Officer knew the limitations of his discipline; he knew, in particular, that the essence of a man's being, his selfhood, was inherently impossible of access to any objective medical test—McCoy himself had often made just this point. Janice/K's denunciation planted a seed in his own mind.

Something had happened to the Captain while he was on the planet. Whatever it was could have taken place only in the short time while he was alone with Dr Lester. A talk with her might be the only way to shed light on it.

There were two strapping guards outside her detention cell. Spock said to the first, "How is Dr Lester?"

"Conscious and quiet, Mr Spock."

"Good. I have a few questions to ask her."

"Did the Captain order it, sir?"

"Why should he?" Spock said. "They are my questions. Therefore I am ordering it, Ensign."

"But the Captain said no one was to speak to Dr Lester."

"Has such an order ever included his senior officers?"

"Well, no, sir." The ensign activated the door and Spock started in. "But, Mr Spock, I believe the Captain meant a guard was to be present."

"By all means."

Janice/K's first words on seeing them were "Thank God! Spock, you've got to listen to me."

"That is why I came," Spock said. "Apparently something happened while you and the Captain were alone. What was it?"

"She changed bodies with me, with the aid of an ancient machine she'd unearthed. Spock, I *am Captain Kirk.* I know how unbelievable it sounds. But that's how it happened."

"It is a possibility I had not considered."

"Unless I can convince you, I have no hope at all of ever getting out of this body."

"Complete life-entity transfer with the aid of a mechanical device?"

"Yes. Dr Lester's description of its function is the last moment I remember as myself."

"To my knowledge," Spock said, "such total transfer has never been accomplished with complete success anywhere in the Galaxy."

"It was accomplished and forgotten long ago on Camus II. I am a living example."

"That is your claim. As yet, it is unsubstantiated."

"I know, Spock. Nevertheless I'm speaking the truth. Listen—when I was caught in the interspace of the Tholian sector, you risked your life and even the *Enterprise* to get me back. Help me get back now. And, when the Vians of Minara demanded that we let McCoy die, we didn't permit it. How would I know those things if I were not James Kirk?"

"Such incidents may have been recorded. They could have become known to you."

"You are closer to the Captain than anyone in the universe. You know his thoughts. What does your telepathic sense tell you?"

Spock touched her face and closed his eyes, his own face a study in concentration as he established a mind meld. Then he withdrew his hand and looked at her with new determination.

"I believe you," he said. "My belief is not acceptable evidence. But I will make every effort to make it so. Only Dr McCoy can help us. Come with me."

"I'm sorry, sir," the guard said. "But Dr Lester can *not* leave here. You're asking me to violate the Captain's order."

"He is not the Captain."

"Sir, you must be as mad as she is. You're to leave here at once. I follow orders."

"Certainly, Ensign," Spock said. "We must all do our duty."

While he was still talking, he lashed out. The scuffle was brief, but the guard outside the cell was alert—he could be heard calling, "Security to Captain Kirk! The detention cell has been broken into!"

When they emerged, the guard was standing with his back to the opposite wall, phaser leveled. Kirk/J and two more guards were already coming down the corridor, followed by McCoy.

Spock stopped. "Violence is not called for, sir," he said. "No *physical* resistance will be offered."

Kirk/J hit the intercom button. "Security detail to Detention at once. Attention all personnel. First Officer Spock is being placed under arrest on a charge of mutiny. He has conspired with

Dr Lester to take over the ship from your Captain. A hearing will be immediately convened to consider the charges and specifications for a general court-martial." He turned to McCoy. "The board will consist of Scott, you and myself."

"I will not be made party to a court-martial of Spock," McCoy said. "There are better ways to handle it."

"You are not forced to condemn anyone. You are asked—no, you are ordered—to vote your honest convictions. Two out of three carries the final verdict. Convene the board. Guard, return Dr Lester to isolation. She will be held for sanity tests."

The hearing was held in the briefing room. Kirk/J sat at the head of the table, gavel in hand; McCoy sat quietly to one side. Uhura was making a tape of the proceedings, and Chekov, Sulu and Nurse Chapel were listening intently as Scott began cross-examining Spock.

"Mr Spock, you are a scientist—a leading scientist of the Galaxy."

"That's very pleasant to hear, Mr Scott. But it is an exaggeration. I have long since sacrificed basic theoretical investigation for the more immediate excitement of life on the *Enterprise.*"

"I meant, your approach to every problem is completely scientific."

"I hope so," Spock said.

"Therefore your statement that you believe this fantastic tale about transference of life entities between the Captain and Dr Lester is intended to be taken seriously by this court."

"Completely seriously."

"Yet you have no evidence on which to base it."

"I have stated my evidence: telepathic communication with the mind of Captain James T. Kirk."

"You are a reasonable man, Spock," Scott said, exasperated. "But that is not a reasonable statement. Far from it. Far from it. Surely you must have had more than that to go on."

"It was sufficient for me."

"Well, it's not sufficient for a court. Your evidence is completely subjective. You know that, laddie. What has happened to you? We must have evidence we can examine out in the open."

Spock threw a challenging look toward Kirk/J. "You have heard a great deal of testimony—except that of the chief witness. The one

who should be the real subject of this inquiry is kept locked away in isolation. Why, *Captain?*"

"She is dangerously insane," Kirk/J said. "We have seen evidence of that."

"She is dangerous only to your authority, *sir.*"

"Mr Spock, my authority was granted to me by Star-fleet Command. Only that high authority can take it away."

"Then why be afraid of the testimony of a poor insane woman?"

"This clumsy effort does not threaten my position, Mr Spock. It does endanger your whole future."

"The witness, sir! Bring on the witness! Let your officers put the questions!"

Kirk/J hesitated a moment. Then he banged his gavel and nodded to a guard, who went out. "Dr McCoy."

"Yes, Captain."

"You were at one time disturbed by my orders and reactions, is that not true?"

"Yes, sir."

"But instead of trying to destroy me, you were searching for a way to help me. For the record, tell the court your findings."

"Physically the Captain is in the best of condition. His emotional and mental states are comparable to the time he assumed command of the *Enterprise.*"

"Mr Spock, did you know the results of Dr McCoy's examination?"

"I know them now," Spock said. "And what have you to say now?"

"I am disappointed and deeply concerned that there is no objective evidence to support my position—so far."

"Since there is no evidence, will you give up your belief in the insane story of a woman driven mad by a tragic experience?"

Before Spock could reply, the door opened and the woman in question herself was brought in by two guards. Kirk/J pointed to a chair, and she sat down.

"Dr Lester," he said, "I appreciate your being here. Everyone is deeply aware that you have already been subjected to inordinate emotional stress. Unfortunately, I have had to add to it in the interest of the safety of this crew. I had hoped that any further stress could be avoided. Mr Spock disagrees. He is of the opinion that your testimony is important in determining the merits of his

case. Since we are solely interested in arriving at a just decision, we must ask you a few questions. We shall all try not to upset you." At this, she nodded. "Now. You claim you are James T. Kirk."

"No, I am not .Captain Kirk," Janice/K said composedly. "That is very apparent. I doubt that Mr Spock would have put it that way. I claim that whatever it is that makes James Kirk a living being special to himself is held here in this body."

"I stand corrected. However—as I understand it—I am Dr Janice Lester."

There was a snicker from the guards.

"That's very clever," she responded. "But I didn't say it. I said the body of James Kirk is being used by Dr Janice Lester."

"A subtle difference that happens to escape me," Kirk/ J said with a smile. "However, I assume that this—this switch was brought about by mutual agreement."

"No. It was brought about by a violent attack by Dr Lester, with the use of equipment she discovered on Camus II."

"Violence by the lady perpetrated on Captain Kirk? Tsk, tsk. I ask the assembled personnel to look at Dr Lester and visualize that historic moment."

This time the laughter was general. Kirk/J waited until it had ridden itself out, then continued, "And do you know any reason why Dr Janice Lester would want this ludicrous exchanged

"Yes! To achieve a power her peers would not accord her. To attain a position she does not merit by training or temperament. And most of all she wanted to murder the man who might have loved her—had her intense hatred of her own womanhood not made life with her impossible."

Spock rose angrily. "Sir, this line of questioning is self-serving. There is only one issue: Is the story of life-entity transfer believable? This crew has been to many places in the Galaxy. You *have not.* They are familiar with many strange events. They are trained to recognize that what seems completely unbelievable on the surface is scientifically possible if you understand the basic theory of the event."

"Mr Spock, do you know of any other case like the one Dr Lester describes?"

"Not precisely. No."

"Assuming you are correct in your belief, do you expect Starfleet Command to place that person"—his finger stabbed at Janice/K —"in command of this ship?"

"I expect only to reveal the truth."

"Of course you do. And with the truth revealed that I am not really the Captain—and knowing that she will not be appointed Captain—then of course *you* will become the Captain." Kirk/J looked at Spock with apparent compassion. "Give it up, Spock. Return to the *Enterprise* family. All charges will be dropped. The madness that temporarily overcame us all on Camus II will pass and be forgotten."

"And what will happen to Dr Lester?"

"Dr Lester will be properly cared for. Always. That is a debt and a responsibility I owe her from the past."

"No, sir!" Spock said emphatically. "I will not withdraw a single charge I have made. You are not Captain Kirk. You have ruthlessly appropriated his body. But the life entity within you is not that of Captain Kirk. You do not belong in command of the *Enterprise.* I will do everything in my power against you."

"Lieutenant Uhura," Kirk/J said with dangerous quietness, "play back the last two sentences of Mr Spock's tirade."

Speck's voice rang out from the speaker of the recorder: "You do not belong in command of the *Enterprise.* I will do everything in my power against you."

"Mr Spock, you have heard the statement you put into the record. Do you understand the nature of it?"

"I do. And I stand by it."

"And that is mutiny!" Kirk/J shouted, his face livid. "Deliberate—vindictive—insane at its base—but it is mutiny as charged and incitement to mutiny. Dr McCoy, Mr Scott, you have heard it. On the basis of these statements, I call for an immediate summary court-martial by powers granted to me as Captain of the *Enterprise.*"

"Just a moment, Captain," Scott said. "I'm not ready to vote Mr Spock into oblivion so fast. Mr Spock is a serious man. What he says is to be taken seriously, no matter how wild."

"Come to the point."

"I'm right at the nub of it, Captain. You don't put a man like Mr Spock out of the service because of a condition akin to temporary insanity. Dr McCoy, you said the woman may have become mentally deranged due to the radiation she was exposed to."

"Yes, Scotty."

"Couldn't the same thing have happened to Mr Spock? He was a sight closer to the source of the radiation."

"It's possible."

"Then the mutiny is qualified by the temporary insanity due to the…"

"Thank you, my friend," Spock interrupted. "A noble try. But I was not exposed to the celebium. I took every precaution. And I have been given precautionary treatment since then by Dr McCoy. I am completely sound in body and mind."

"Mutiny," said Kirk/J, pounding with the gavel. "A summary court-martial on the evidence and the charges is immediately invoked. A recess will be followed by a vote."

"Yes," Spock said. "An immediate vote. This matter must be cleared up at once, before…"

The gavel pounded a loud tattoo. "Silence!"

"Before our chief witness," Spock shouted above the din, "is left to die on an obscure little colony with the truth locked away inside her!"

Kirk/J rose, his face red with hysteria, almost to the point of apoplexy. "Silence, silence! A recess is declared. The summary court will then be in session. There will be no cross-discussion. No conferences. No collusion. I order the judges to be absolutely silent as they arrive at a decision on the charge of mutiny. When I return we will vote. The evidence presented here can be the only basis for your decision.

He stormed out of the room, leaving everyone stunned. McCoy began to pace. The silence stretched out. At last Scott said, "Who ever heard of a jury being forbidden to deliberate?"

He went out into the corridor, followed by the others, leaving behind Janice/K, Spock and the guards, as well as Uhura.

"What's there to say?" McCoy said.

"Doctor, I've seen the Captain feverish, sick, drunk, delirious, terrified, overjoyed, boiling mad. Until now I've never seen him beet-red with hysteria. I know how I'm going to vote."

"I've been through this with Spock. He is not being scientific. And neither are you."

"It may not be scientific," Scott said, "but if Spock thinks it happened, it must be logical."

"Don't you think I know that? My tests show nothing wrong with the Captain. That's the only fact that will interest Starfleet."

"Headquarters has its problems—and we've got ours. Right now the Captain of me *Enterprise is* our problem."

McCoy frowned. He started to pace again, but was halted by Nurse Chapel.

"Doctor," she said, whispering, "I didn't notice it at the time. But in her first lucid moment, Dr Lester asked why we were going to miss our rendezvous with the *Potemkin.* How could she know that?"

"Hmm. Especially since the Captain *didn't.* Scotty, the vote is going to be called in a few minutes."

"Let me put one last question. Suppose you voted with me in favor of Spock. That's two to one and Spock is free. What do you think the Captain will do?"

"I don't know."

"You know, all right. The vote will stick in his craw. He'll never accept it.

McCoy angrily walked away a few steps and then turned back and looked hard at Scott. "We don't know that."

"I tell you, he won't. Then, Doctor, that's the time to move against him. We'll have to take over the ship."

"We're talking mutiny, Scotty."

"Yes. Are you ready for the vote?"

"I'm ready for the vote."

Kirk/J was already back in the briefing room when they reentered. When they were all seated, he stood up. "Lieutenant Uhura, play back the tapes of the conversation in the corridor."

Uhura, looking both grief-stricken and guilt-ridden, moved a switch. Recorded voices said: "Then, Doctor, that's the time to move against him. Well have to take over the ship."

"We re talking mutiny, Scotty."

"Yes. Are you ready for the vote?"

"That's enough," McCoy said angrily. "We know what was said."

"Enough to convict you for conspiracy with mutineers," Kirk/J said, drawing his phaser. The guards followed suit. "You are so charged. The penalty is death."

Chekov and Sulu both jumped forward, talking almost at once.

"Starfleet expressly forbids the death penalty…"

"There is only one exception…"

"General Order Four has not been violated by any officer of the *Enterprise*…"

"All my senior officers have turned against me," Kirk/J said. "I am responsible. Execution will be immediate. Go to your posts. Guards, take them to the brig."

Only Uhura, Sulu and Chekov were at their posts on the bridge, a sadly depleted corporal's guard. They were working, but their expressions were listless, abstracted. Sulu said at last, "The Captain really must be cracking up if he thinks he can get away with an execution."

"Captain Kirk wouldn't order an execution even if he did crack up," Chekov said. "Spock's right, that can't be the Captain."

"What difference does it make who he is?" said Uhura. "Are we going to allow an execution to take place?"

Chekov clenched his fists. "If Security backs him up, how will we fight them?"

Sulu said, "I'll fight them every way and any way I can…"

The conversation was choked off as Kirk/J came onto the bridge, highly elated. When he spoke, the sentences seemed almost to tumble over one another in then-haste to get out. "Lieutenant Uhura, inform all sections of the decision. Have each section send a representative to the place of execution on the hangar deck. Mr Chekov, how far to the Benecia Colony?"

"Coming within scanning range."

"Plot coordinates for orbit. Mr Sulu, lock into coordinates as soon as orbit is accomplished. Interment will take place on Benecia."

There were no "Ayes," and nobody moved. Kirk/J stared at his officers. "You have received your orders."

Still no response.

"You have received your orders. You will obey at once or be charged with mutiny." His voice began to rise in pitch, losing its male timbre. "Obey my orders or—or…"

Then, suddenly, he reeled, staggered, and fell into his chair, seemingly almost in a faint. His body contorted for a moment and then became rigid, his eyes staring wider, but sightlessly.

The others rose in alarm, but the seizure lasted only a moment Them Kirk/J was out of the chair and leaped for the elevator.

Dr Coleman was alone in the medical lab when Kirk /J burst in. "Coleman—the transference is weakening."

"What happened?"

"For a moment I was with the prisoners. I won't go back to being Janice Lester. Help me prevent it."

"The only way to prevent it is by the death of Janice Lester. You'll have to carry out the execution."

"I can't," Kirk/J said. "The crew is in mutiny. You must kill him for me."

"I have done everything else for you. But I tell you I will not commit murder for you."

"You can do it for yourself," Kirk/J said urgently. "If I am the Captain of the *Enterprise,* you will regain your position as a Ship's Surgeon. I will see to that."

"I would have been content with you, as you were. I did not need a starship."

"Unless Kirk dies, we will both be exposed as murderers. Does that leave you any choice?"

Reluctantly, Coleman picked up an air hypo; selected a cartridge and snapped it into place.

"The dose must be doubly lethal."

"It is," Coleman said impassively.

Kirk/J led the way to the brig. Judging by the woman's tense expression and the way the others were grouped around her, she too had felt that moment of transitory retransference, and was ready to fight to prolong it should it occur again.

"I have demanded the sentence of execution," Kirk/J said. "However, to prevent any further conspiracy, you will be placed in separate cells. If there is any resistance, a sedative will be administered until you learn cooperation. Dr Lester is first. Follow Dr Coleman."

Coleman went back out through the force field. Janice/K held back suspiciously, but then also stepped out into the corridor, Kirk/J behind her. After only a few steps he said loudly, "This woman obviously doesn't know what it means to obey an order."

The hypo flashed in Coleman's hand, but not quickly enough. Janice/K saw it and grabbed that arm with both hands, struggling with all her poor strength to deflect it.

Again the look of dizziness and complete terror overwhelmed Kirk/J; once more his body contorted and grew taut.

The same paralysis gripped Janice/K, its rigidity immobilizing Coleman's arm as her conscious efforts could never have done. Then she screamed.

"Don't! Don't! I have lost to the Captain! I have lost to James Kirk!" And then, in a cry of pure madness, "Kill him! Kill *him!*"

Kirk, whose first move had been to shut off the brig's force field, met Coleman's rush easily; a quick chop and it was over. He turned to Janice, whose face was contorted with hatred and agony. "Kill him! I want James Kirk dead! Kill him!" Then, sobbing painfully like a child, "I will never be the Captain—never—never—kill him…"

Coleman, who had been only momentarily stunned, tossed aside the hypo, clambered to his feet and came over to her. She began to collapse, and Coleman took her in his arms.

"You are," he said, "as I have loved you."

"Kill him," Janice said quietly, her eyes vacant. "Please."

Spock, McCoy and Scott were all out in the corridor. Kirk seized each of them in turn by the hand. "Bones, is there anything you can do for her?"

"I would like to take care of her," Coleman said pleadingly.

"Of course," said McCoy. "Come with me." He led them away toward sickbay.

Kirk looked after them. "I didn't want to destroy her," he said.

"You had to," Spock said. "How else could you have survived, Captain? To say nothing of the rest of us."

"Her life could have been as rich as any woman's, if only—" He paused and sighed. "If only…"

"If only," Spock said, "she had ever been able to take any pride in *being* a woman."

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